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Prof. Homi K. Bhabha
on his 75th Birth Anniversary

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ARTICLES

The Biosemiotic Gaze of the Derridean “Wholly Other” in Yamen Manaï’s
Bel Abîm

Keith Moser

1

Mutual Mirroring between East and West: An Imagological Analysis of
二馬 (*Mr. Ma and Son*)

Yang Xu

12

Modern Psychology and the Loss of Transcendence

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

23

Adding or Removing Clarity? Hegel, Hassan Massoudy and the Reason of
Arabic Script and Calligraphy

Alberto Merzari

32

‘Idols that Have Mouths but Do Not Speak’: Levinas’ Critique of Art
between Platonism and Jewish Aniconism

Giulia Cervato

42

The Paradox of Teaching Fiction in French Educational Contexts

Jean-Francois Vernay

53

Myth and Writing in Plato’s *Phaedrus*

Kyriaki Grammenou

62

Shining on the Blues: Reading Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” through and
beyond Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*

Phillip E. Mitchell

72

Best of all Possible Worlds? Victor Peterson II	81
Footprints, Movement, and ‘the Road We’re Already On’: From <i>Robinson Crusoe</i> (1719) to <i>Oryx and Crake</i> (2003) Avril Tynan	96
Reading Eternity: Haggard’s <i>She</i> and Immortality in the Fin-de-siècle Novel Daniel Dougherty	104
Structures of Urban Design in 19th Century American Literature Michael Anders	115
Is What We See in the Picture the Same as What the Picture Presents? Alberto Voltolini	129
The Images of the “Monster” Tradition, Symbolism and Representations Karim Simpure	140
Soul-blindness, Trauma, and Reenactment: A Cavellian Reading of <i>The Act of Killing</i> and <i>The Look of Silence</i> Raffaele Ariano	150
Abubakar Gimba’s Letter to the Unborn Child and the Ontological Masquerading of the Nigerian ‘Being’: An Existential Intervention Oluwatobi David Esan	158
Moral Luck and Accepting Responsibility in Paul Auster’s <i>Sunset Park</i> Nigel Rodenhurst and Tristan Nash	168
Biblical Intertextuality, Nissim Ezekiel and the Jungian “Enterprise” Shouvik Narayan Hore	176
“Number one for ever”: Benthamite Utilitarianism, <i>Oliver Twist</i> and the Doctrine of Methodological Individualism Harisankar Anirudhan	183
Examining Leo Tolstoy’s Character Anna Karenina through the Lens of Erich Neumann’s Thoughts on the Medusa Myth Anil Singh Matoo	191
Kalki’s <i>Ponniyin Selvan</i> : Tamil Modernity, Revivalism and the Popular Historical Novel Catherine Shilpa X and Merin Simi Raj	203

BOOK REVIEWS

- A Philosophy of Visual Metaphor in Contemporary Art* (2023). By Mark Staff Brandl.
Margaryta Golovchenko 215
- The Routledge Companion to Beauty Politics* (2023). By Maxine Leeds Craig (Ed.).
Michael R. Spicher 216
- Three Encounters: Heidegger, Arendt, Derrida* (2023). By David Farrell Krell.
Soni Wadhwa 218
- Punjabi Centuries: Tracing Histories of Punjab* (2024). By Anshu Malhotra.
Soni Wadhwa 220
- Discovering Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu, Jain and Buddhist Thought* (2024). By Jeffery D. Long.
Soni Wadhwa 221
- Fake News in Contemporary Science and Politics: A Requiem for the Real?* (2024). By Keith Moser.
Kenichiro Otani 223
- Milton, Longinus, and the Sublime in the Seventeenth Century (Classical Presences)* (2024). By Thomas Matthew Vozar.
Shouvik Narayan Hore 225
- Simplicity and Purity: Poets, Farmers and Parsis of Gandhi's Gujarati and Reading Gandhi in Two Tongues* (2024). By Tridip Suhrud.
Ayan Chakraborty 227
- Romantic Women's Writing and Sexual Transgression* (2024). By Kathryn Ready and David Sigler (Eds.).
Tisuk Mazumder 229
- Reading with the R̥ṣi: A Cross-Cultural and Comparative Literary Approach to Vālmiki's Rāmāyaṇa* (2024). By Robert P. Goldman.
Sreya Mukherjee 232
- The Real Thing: Reflections on a Literary Form* (2024). By Terry Eagleton.
Najah Mahmi 234

The Biosemiotic Gaze of the Derridean “Wholly Other” in Yamen Manaï’s *Bel Abîme*

KEITH MOSER

I. Introduction

This essay explores the Tunisian writer-engineer Yamen Manaï’s latest novel *Bel Abîme* (2021) from a Derridean and biosemiotic lens. Delving into Jacques Derrida’s posthumous ecological thought in addition to the well-established interdiscipline of biosemiotics, this investigation examines the profound inner transformation that occurs when we find ourselves under the biosemiotic gaze of another sentient, semiotic agent. After he *sees* and *is seen* by an abandoned puppy that he will soon adopt, the troubled protagonist from *Bel Abîme* will forge a meaningful bond with another living entity for the first time in his turbulent existence as he discovers the reality of other-than-human sentience and friendship. Instead of being a robotic automaton that purely operates according to an internal machinery, as much of Western philosophy theorizes, the narrator realizes that his dog Bella is endowed with a degree of semiotic ability that enables her to communicate in skillful and deliberate ways with members of the canine and human population. Owing to his tight-knight relationship with his other-than-human companion, the protagonist recognizes that “Mark, grammar, trace, and différance refer differentially to all living things, all the relations between living and nonliving” (Derrida, *The Animal* 104). When their eyes initially lock in a rather fortuitous encounter, the narrator from *Bel Abîme* cannot turn away from “the gaze called ‘animal’” that represents an ethical summons to live otherwise (Derrida, *The Animal* 12). Not only will the protagonist realize a genuine state of happiness through the splendor of *interspecific* communication and friendship because of Bella, but he will also be struck by the biocentric epiphany that the “wholly other” is an ethical agent in its own right that is worthy of moral consideration (Derrida, *The Animal* 12). The realization that other species live, suffer, and die just like *Homo sapiens* leads to an ethics of compassion for all of the “fellow” ephemeral beings with whom we share the biosphere in the Anthropocene/Technocene.

II. Brief Contextualization of Yamen Manaï’s *Bel Abîme*

In this regard, Manaï builds upon many of the ecological themes that he develops in his previous novel *L’Amas ardent* for which he received the prestigious *Prix des cinq continents de la francophonie*. The Tunisian writer broaches a lot of divergent subjects in this short, dense book including the disenchantment felt by many Maghrebi youth linked to the unfulfilled ideals of the Arab Spring, religious fundamentalism, terrorism, the alienation of the postmodern lifestyle, and the environmental crisis that is spiraling out of control. However, *Bel Abîme* is above all the story of a social outcast who has a difficult time establishing positive relationships with other humans who commits a string of murders after a misguided plan to remove Bella from his life was set into motion by his own father. *Bel Abîme* is a tale of retribution in which a loner callously executes all of the people who he deems responsible for his dog’s death including his father. Within the context of this somber,

tragic backdrop, the focal point of the narrative soon reveals itself to be a “very beautiful love story” between a human and an other-than-human friend (“‘Bel Abîme’ dernier roman de Yamen Manai”).¹ The heinous murders themselves are surprisingly overshadowed by the veritable force of the biosemiotic gaze of the “wholly other” that appears to be on the verge of healing the disconnected narrator before the ill-advised decision to take Bella away from him abruptly ends this moral progression. Unable to cope with the searing pain of losing his only friend, the protagonist’s only *raison d’être* is revenge.

III. The Transformative, Biosemiotic Gaze of the “Wholly Other”

Although the “experience of coming out of the shower and being looked at naked by his household cat” recounted by Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I am* is much more light-hearted and comical compared to the brutality of the crimes depicted in *Bel Abîme*, the philosopher creates a useful theoretical framework for understanding the implications of the other-than-human gaze that sheds light on the appalling *dénouement* in Manai’s most recent work (Naas 225). The seemingly banal encounter described by Derrida opens up into profound philosophical “reappraisals of human-animal relations in general” in addition to a reevaluation of “language in the broad sense, codes of traces being designed, among all living things” (Williams 24; Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign* vol. 2 8). As evidenced by his “copious references” to the German biologist and founding father of Biosemiotics Jakob von Uexküll, Derrida leans heavily on biosemiotic theory and scientific explanations of the world in his reworking of the complexity of other-than-human semiosis (*The Animal* 143). Specifically, Derrida adopts the main biosemiotic premise that the universe is teeming with purposeful and meaningful communication from a basic cell up to *Homo sapiens*. Even if our species is hardwired with the most sophisticated primary modeling device of all in the form of “language(s),” Derrida’s aforementioned destabilizing experience forces him to think harder about the other types of semiosis that are ubiquitous throughout the cosmos. Based on evidence obtained from the hard sciences, Derrida reaches the conclusion that “semiosis is synonymous with life” at all biological levels of organization (Wheeler, “The Book of Nature” 177). We may have a heightened predilection to engage in semiosis, but Derrida suggests that we should not so hastily dismiss the significance of the signs conceived, exchanged, and interpreted by other organisms in their “personal semiotic space” (Kull 172).

When the initial shock wears off, Derrida astutely observes, “The Animal is there before me [...] nothing will have ever given me more food for thinking that this absolute alterity of the neighbor or of the next (-door) than these moments when I see myself naked under the gaze of the cat” (*The Animal* 11). Later in the essay, Derrida reiterates, “Let me repeat it, every living creature, and thus every animal to the extent that it is living, has recognized in it this power to move spontaneously, to feel itself and to relate to itself. However, problematic it be, that is even the characteristic of what lives” (*The Animal* 94). As opposed to being a singular human trait, as proponents of human exceptionalism obstinately maintain, every species possesses a “semiotic system” for the conception, transmission, and interpretation of signs corresponding to a “subjective point of view” of the given organism in question (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign* vol. 1 116; Wheeler, “A Feeling” 65). Derrida catches a glimpse of this frame of reference, or “the vantage of the animal,” when his eyes meet those of his cat walking out of the shower (*The Animal* 21). From a biosemiotic perspective, the philosopher’s peculiar encounter with his feline companion triggers the awareness that “sensory beings should be considered as subjects inhabiting their own perceptual world, or Umwelt” (Abberley 11).

Nonetheless, Derrida is careful to not fall into the conceptual trap of assuming that another species could somehow be granted privileged access to the inner semiotic realm of another life form. The philosopher rejects the faulty oppositional thinking pitting “semiotically active humans” against “semiotically inactive nature” while simultaneously acknowledging that we can never “know (exactly) what goes on in the heads of animals” (Maran 142; 142, Derrida, *The Animal* 6, my insertion).

We will never be able to understand *everything* that our other-than-human family members are trying to convey to us from the outside looking in at “the wholly other, more other than any other, which *they* call an animal” (*The Animal* 11, italics in original). The “secret inner stirrings of (other) animals” are “uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable, abyssal and secret” in their totality (Derrida, *The Animal* 6, my insertion; 12). Nevertheless, this “bottomless gaze,” which shatters the anthropocentric illusion of “animal linguistic poverty,” is laden with semiotic content (Derrida, *The Animal* 12; Peterson 90). Instead of being surrounded by mindless machines that are unable to communicate anything at all, Derrida posits that we are immersed in a sea of tactical semiosis.

Moreover, the realization that “the world is a rich book of signs” explains how two species who share a long history of co-habitation owing to the advent of domestication have developed the ability to comprehend *some* of the semiotic codes of another organism, thereby enabling our pets to become full-fledged members of the family (Wheeler, “Postscript” 139). We cannot overcome the problem of “translation” identified by Derrida perfectly, or the “difficulty of accessing the logic of other communication systems,” yet “most of the time, man happens to be able to communicate with (other) animals” (Maran et al. 22; Lestel 77, my insertion). This capacity to engage in *interspecific* dialogue through various vocalizations and gestures is on full display in *Bel Abîme*. When their eyes meet for the first time, the protagonist recognizes that he is in the presence of another sentient, semiotic agent. From “under the cardboard boxes” on the street, Bella’s biosemiotic gaze is a look of distress that the narrator correctly interprets (Manaï 44). After answering the summons to rescue another living, vulnerable being from a terrible fate, the protagonist learns to decode other looks, noises, and body language over a period of three years before Bella is senselessly executed. Given that they usually understand each other quite well, a true friendship is born between an adolescent and his dog epitomized by the exchange of reciprocal affection and a wide range of emotions. The narrator and his other-than-human companion will experience all of the ecstasy and anguish that life has to afford *together* before Bella’s murder.

The biosemiotic gaze of the “wholly other” completely transforms an alienated young man, as he connects to another entity on a deep level. The protagonist “will forget little by little the atrocious nature of his sad reality,” because of “his enthusiastic attachment to Bella” (“‘Bel Abîme’ dernier roman de Yamen Manaï”). As the narrator reveals, “For the first time, I felt a soul inhabit my body” (Manaï 48). He further clarifies, “Love, I only saw it in her eyes and it transformed me. Believe me, a child finds in a dog what he does not find in a thousand men. We grew up together and nothing and no one had the right to separate us. I could have stepped over the good Lord to reach Bella” (Manaï 82). It is evident that the protagonist of *Bel Abîme* is no longer the same person after the inner transformation actuated by the other-than-human gaze. Although some readers might dismiss this radical evolution as being anecdotal, a large body of empirical evidence lends credence to the theory that close relationships with other animals are indeed life-altering. For instance, researchers have studied the psychological and ethical effects of other-than-human friendship for prisoners (e.g. Deaton, Flynn et al., Cooke and Farrington, Mims, Waddell, and Holton), residents of retirement facilities (e.g. Cherniack and Cherniack, Cole), and those who suffer from PTSD (e.g. Rodriguez et al., O’Haire and Rodriguez, van Houtert et al.). A salient example of these benefits is the finding from prison-based dog training programs all across the United States that other-than-human companionship “can facilitate a change within the individual which cannot easily be matched by traditional methods” (Deaton 59). Since numerous scholars have documented how quotidian encounters with other animals allow us to become a better version of our inner selves by (re-) connecting to both the human and non-human Other, Manaï’s portrayal of the force of the biosemiotic gaze should be taken seriously.

During the most traumatic periods of our lives, researchers have uncovered how authentic, semiotic exchanges with other species trigger a healing process. In this vein, empirical evidence has now confirmed what many pet “owners” have known for centuries. When our dogs, cats, hamsters, etc.

attempt to comfort us when we are visibly stressed or anxious, these reactions are indicative of real compassion. Several studies have unequivocally proven that “many dogs show empathy if their owner is in distress and will also try to help rescue them” (“Empathetic Dogs”). Emily Sanford, Emma Burt, and Julia Meyers-Mano found irrefutable “patterns of empathetic helping in conditions of distress” by canines who interpreted signs of sorrow and suffering exhibited by their “owners” (384). The data presented in these experiments helps us to understand one of the most poignant scenes in the novel following Bella’s death. The protagonist imagines how Bella would have reacted to his visceral grief in an impossible, hypothetical scenario. Fondly recalling how Bella would make him feel better in times of anguish, the narrator reminisces, “You would have not liked to see my cry [...] You would have drunk my tears and dried my cheeks” (Manaï 92). Manaï offers an artistic representation of the reality of cross-species empathy in this passage rendered possible by *interspecific* communication. When placed in the context of “new research (which) shows that dogs respond to their owner’s unhappiness,” this scene should once again not be labeled as anecdotal (Coren, my insertion). Furthermore, it is well within the realm of possibilities that the psychological and moral progression propelled into motion by the biosemiotic gaze of the “wholly other” could have one day enabled the protagonist to establish positive relationships with other humans as well. Unfortunately, the narrator’s development comes to a screeching halt when he loses his only friend.

IV. The Reality of Other-than-human Suffering

The protagonist’s grief is compounded by the recognition of other-than-human suffering from a philosophical, psychological, and ethical standpoint. Similar to Derrida’s experience coming out of the shower, the narrator from *Bel Abîme* discovers that all other organisms are not “automatons of flesh and blood” through the biosemiotic gaze (Derrida, *The Animal* 83). The protagonist envisions all of the physical and emotional pain induced by Bella’s kidnapping and subsequent execution before she took her final breath. Compared to the people who plotted against Bella including the father who were operating under the scientifically erroneous assumption that there was no crime of which to speak, the narrator is keenly aware that his dog is not an *animal-machine* lacking the capacity to articulate anything at all, but rather his other-than-human friend is a sentient, semiotic agent that deserves at least some moral consideration. In other words, those responsible for Bella’s murder justify their egregious actions based on the outmoded ethical position partly inherited from Judeo-Christian ideology, Cartesian thought, and Renaissance Humanism that all other creatures are essentially robots that should be relegated to the status of non-living automata. It would be utterly preposterous to feel any sense of remorse for the killing of a machine-like being. As Rod Preece concludes, “If the animal is truly a living machine [...] on what basis may we respect the animal in a manner different from the bizarre idea of respecting a machine in and for itself? How may we treat the animal ‘machine’ as an end in itself, as an object of moral consideration, when we treat a machine—a watch, say, or a locomotive—entirely as a means to an end” (46). The previously mentioned biosemiotic insights into existence highlighted by Derrida and Manaï deliver the final proverbial *coup de grâce* to Descartes’s “notorious *bêtemachine* theory” (Batra 156).

After eviscerating the “claim that animals are literally and simply machines” in his biosemiotic reflections, Derrida hypothesizes that all other species are “fellow” sentient, semiotic organisms upon which a degree of moral dignity must be conferred (Castricano 17). The anthropocentric idea that anything is permissible in the context of human-animal relations collapses. Any entity that deliberately and strategically creates, sends, and interprets signs that are paramount to its survival is not a machine in any sense. This knowledge derived from biosemiotic theory and contemporary scientific erudition serves to “awaken us to our responsibilities and our obligations vis-à-vis the living in general, and precisely to this fundamental compassion that were we to take it seriously, would have to change even the very cornerstone [...] of the philosophical problematic of the animal” (Derrida, *The Animal* 27). In addition to probing the semiotic abilities of his ordinary household cat, Derrida

contests the *bête-machine* doctrine by alluding to empirical evidence related to other-than-human pain (e.g. Watabiki et al., Burma et al., Sneddon et al.). Armed with the proof that other life forms suffer from the same “acute and chronic pain syndromes” as *Homo sapiens*, Derrida declares, “No one can deny the suffering, fear, or panic, the terror or fright that can seize certain animals and that we humans can witness” (Hansen 197; Derrida, *The Animal* 28). On the basis of evidence, experience, and common sense, the only logical, anti-Cartesian conclusion is that “what becomes undeniable as we move forward is that animals suffer” (Lawlor 45). Hence, there is no legitimate reason for the protagonist of *Bel Abîme* to discount the physical and emotional agony that Bella undoubtedly endured at the end of her life. The awareness of “the sharing of this suffering among the living” deepens the narrator’s grief, for he cannot bear the thought that he was not around to protect Bella in her time of need (Derrida, *The Animal* 26).

What happens to Bella is an example of “[t]he worst, the cruelest, the most human violence (that) has been unleashed against living beings [...] who precisely were not accorded the dignity of being fellows” (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign* vol. 1 108, my insertion). Derrida’s concept of a “fellow” emphasizes the universal condition of all mortal beings on a biosphere in which it is impossible to eradicate all forms of suffering. Expressing his ecological solidarity for all sentient, semiotic organisms that feel pain, bleed, and die just like *Homo sapiens*, Derrida affirms, “I am serendipitously extending the similar, the fellow, to all forms of life, to all species. All animals qua living beings are my fellows” (*The Beast and the Sovereign* vol. 1 109). Derrida’s expansion of what it means to be a “fellow” demonstrates how “deconstruction has always gestured towards the more-than-human” (Broglio 33). Even if Derrida did not devote much attention to issues connected to environmental ethics until near the end of his life, he insists that the plight of what we call the *animal* “will have always been the most important and decisive question” (*The Animal* 34). It may have taken him a while to outline his deep-seated ecological concerns, but Derrida’s passionate denunciation of the violence and suffering inflicted upon the other-than-human population effectively brings the “wholly other” out of the shadows and into the light of moral consideration.

Manaï’s depiction of the emotional and physical trauma experienced by Bella after her kidnapping during her final moments on this earth undermines “the organized disavowal” of the reality of other-than-human suffering underscored by Derrida (Derrida, *The Animal* 26). As he imagines the terror felt by Bella after her capture, the protagonist exclaims, “It was my fellows who terrified me, not dogs” (Manaï 45). The narrator is disgusted by the pretexts invented by the local authorities in charge of “animal control” who regularly exterminate stray dogs using the justification that it is the only solution for avoiding overpopulation and the spread of rabies. The refusal of elected officials to recognize Bella as a “fellow” is a systemic problem linked to the pervasive mistreatment of other dogs in the city. Bella is the latest victim in a long string of murders justified under the pretense of keeping everyone safe. In a human-centered culture in which the suffering of the “wholly other” is obfuscated by anthropocentric ideology that runs counter to scientific evidence, the protagonist decides to take matters into his own hands by killing as many politicians as possible during his rampage. The narrator ponders, “Why do they kill dogs? The mayor, the president, the deputies, the ministers, so they don’t give a damn about talking about their fate and deciding to kill them” (Manaï 97). Convinced of their unique ontological essence because of mechanistic views of the world, the public officials in *Bel Abîme* eliminate dogs on a daily basis without a passing thought. It should also be noted that the methods employed by “animal control” in this narrative are inhumane to the extreme. As opposed to euthanizing these sentient animals with various medications designed to alleviate pain, the dog catchers shoot and beat dogs to death. For this reason, the protagonist logically assumes that Bella’s execution was probably slow and excruciating.

Given that the thought of his beloved other-than-human friend in pure agony before she succumbed to death is crushing, the narrator confesses, “I collapsed to my knees. My hands were tearing my face, pulling my hair, I wanted to tear my skin, get out of my body. I mumbled Bella, Bella, I’m

sorry, I'm sorry" (Manaï 78). Reiterating that Bella was not a soulless automaton but rather a "fellow" and most importantly his best friend, the protagonist reveals,

Under a sky of mourning and a moon of blood, I joined my hands to my chest and with a voice from beyond the grave I prayed: O you, appeased soul, return to your Lord, satisfied and approved; therefore enter among My servants, and enter into My Paradise. Yes, I read the Quran, I recited the verses of the Overture and it doesn't matter if it was on the head of a dog, and no one can come to tell me that a dog does not have a soul! (Manaï 94–95)

Even if many people in his society would criticize him for lamenting the passing of Bella, the narrator mourns like one would grieve the loss of any loved one or "fellow." Additionally, the dreadful manner in which Bella probably died intensifies his grief. Manaï's suggestion that it is normal to mourn the disappearance of an other-than-human companion with whom we experienced all of the euphoria and sorrow that is emblematic of life is bolstered by the findings of empirical studies which indicate that "[a]nimal owners who experience the death of a beloved family pet or companion animal may experience feelings of grief and loss that are synonymous with the death of a human" (Cleary et al. 1). Some individuals would judge the protagonist harshly for his "improper, inappropriate and ultimately trivial" behavior stemming from the loss of an entity that was "just a dog" (Kavanagh 9). Yet, nothing could be more proper than to apologize to Bella for the sinister manner in which she was slowly killed. The biosemiotic encounter that thrusts Bella into the narrator's life culminates in a "gaze on the commonality between animals and humans generated by shared suffering, finitude, and compassion" (Slater 691).

V. The Derridean Exercise of "Limitrophy"

The reality of other-than-human anguish also implores us to reinvestigate the porous boundaries between *Homo sapiens* and other animals. To be more precise, Derrida and Manaï's illustrations of the pain felt by our "fellows" deconstruct the pseudo-concept of the *animal* that the philosopher identifies as one of "the greatest and most symptomatic *asinanities* of those who call themselves humans" (Derrida, *The Animal* 41, italics in original). Derrida and Manaï compel us to rethink the actual differences and similarities between our species and other organisms outside of mechanistic logic and dichotomous frameworks. This concerted effort to (re-) delineate the "boundary between human and non-human," which takes into account biosemiotic insights and scientific knowledge, is what Derrida refers to as the philosophical and ethical exercise of *limitrophy* (Yan 281). Without ignoring "the essential or structural differences between the human and animal," "Derrida's idea is not to erase the line that separates us from other living things [...] but rather to multiply its dimensions" (Derrida, *The Animal* 89; Bruns 415). The philosopher's nuanced (re-) conceptualization of other-than-human semiosis problematizes the borders between our species and other organisms without "denying that there are significant differences between humans and other animals" (Patton 164). Derrida advocates in favor of a *limitrophic* shifting of traditional conceptual boundaries predicated upon reductionistic binary logic, but he does not propose that all limits should be effaced entirely. Since there is something unique about the semiotic vantage point of *all* beings including ours, Derrida does not reduce difference to sameness. Instead of committing a different "*asinanity*," or replacing one simplistic mental structure with another, "it is rather a matter of taking into account a multiplicity of heterogeneous structures and limits" (Derrida, *The Animal* 47, italics in original; 48).

After acknowledging that "[t]he animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there" (Derrida, *The Animal* 29), Derrida provides the following operational definition for his concept of *limitrophy*:

Limitrophy is therefore my subject. Not just because it will concern what sprouts or grows at the limit, around the limit, by maintaining the limit, but also what *feeds the limit*, generates it, raises it, and complicates it. Everything I'll say will consist, certainly not in effacing the limit, but in multiplying its

figures, in complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply. (*The Animal* 29, italics in original)

Derrida specifies that the philosophical and moral exercise of *limitrophy* is most of all a preliminary blueprint for contesting “the limit that we have had a stomachful of, the limit between Man with a capital M and Animal with a capital A” (*The Animal* 29, italics in original). Caught under the biosemiotic gaze of the “wholly other,” the philosopher starts to challenge “the very category of ‘the animal’ itself” (Oliver 54). Decrying the inadequacy of the “monolithic category called the animal” (Naas 231), Derrida grumbles, “The confusion of all nonhuman living creatures within the general and common category of the animal is not simply a sin against rigorous thinking, vigilance, lucidity, or empirical authority, it is also a crime” (*The Animal* 47–48). As numerous scholars including Michael Naas, Gerald Bruns, and Marie-Dominique Garnier have noted, Derrida coins the neologism *animot* in an attempt to pluralize the limits between *Homo sapiens* and other animals. Beyond “the seduction of cheap verbal play,” “Derrida makes incisive inroads in effacing the unfairness of the category ‘animal’ in which animals constitute a homogeneous set in fundamental opposition with the human [...] To that end, Derrida proposes the concept *animot/animaux*, a neologism that is pronounced identically in both the singular and plural forms in French, so that the plural for *animals* resonates in the singular form” (Garnier 27; Slater 687, italics in original). When the puritanical shame that he feels trapped naked under the *animot* gaze wanes, this awkward encounter assumes the shape of a profound, *limitrophic* reflection.

The counter-hegemonic “acknowledgement of the gaze” is what “complexifies the limit between the animal and the human” in *Bel Abîme* (Slater 687; 691). It is the discovery of “compassion or love” that he experiences for the first time with Bella that leads the protagonist to question the human-animal divide (Slater 691). Over a period of approximately three years, a beautiful friendship blossoms between a disaffected young man and a canine that results in the deconstruction of “the autobiography of the human species, the whole history of the self that man recounts to himself, that is to say the thesis of a limit as rupture or abyss between those who say ‘we men,’ ‘I, a human,’ and what this man among men who say ‘we,’ what he *calls* the animal or animals” (Derrida, *The Animal* 29–30). Painting a rending portrait of *interspecific* friendship, which demystifies the notion of the *animal* as a homogenous set of soulless automata in sharp contrast to humans, the narrator explains, “I grew up with Bella and Bella grew up with me [...] I was caught up in her pure vitality [...] her energy, her joy. She was my best friend, and almost the only one. After school, I ran to find her. As soon as I opened the gate, she would cheer me on, jump on me, her tail in a whirlwind, and cover my hands and cheeks with her hot pink tongue” (Manaï 54). Given that the deep friendship between Bella and the protagonist undercuts “a strong line of thought which holds that such love *should or must* only be directed towards humans,” the narrator is condemned harshly by his peers for his violation of a conceptual limit (Milligan 195, italics in original). The aforementioned plot to remove Bella from the protagonist’s life, which will “separate [...] fused souls,” is linked to a subversive transgression of species boundaries erected on the basis of reductionistic, dichotomous thought paradigms (Manaï 62).

Similar to Derrida, Manaï’s *limitrophic* exploration of the complex, intertwined relationship between *Homo sapiens* and other animals underscores our heightened biological predisposition to engage in semiosis while simultaneously presenting other organisms as semiotic and moral agents. In a revealing passage, the narrator clarifies, “You are free to think that man is speech, that we are language, that this is what distinguishes us from primates, this mutation at the level of the glottis, this ability to jabber” (Manaï 90–91). This position supported by evidence reflects the mainstream biosemiotic view that humans possess “the most powerful tool for semiotic mediation” (Hasan 489). Nonetheless, the subtlety of Manaï’s arguments demonstrates that “the difference is a matter of degree” in a biosphere replete with the strategic conception, dissemination, and interpretation of signs (Cobley 29). Without being hyperbolic or dismissing our unheralded biosemiotic ability, Derrida and Manaï compellingly promulgate *limitrophic* shifts that recognize the agency of other-than-human “fellows.”

VI. The “Monstrous” Declaration of War Against the Remainder of the Biosphere in the Anthropocene/Technocene

They are also both adamant in their conviction that we no longer have a choice but to “break through the institutional boundaries to interspecific compassion” in defense of other-than-human subjects at the dawn of the Anthropocene/Technocene (Chrulew 13). Derrida’s affirmation that our “monstrous” debasement and exploitation of the “wholly other” equates to nothing short of a *world war* against the rest of the cosmos recalls Michel Serres’s concept of *la guerre mondiale* (*The Animal* 26). Unless we heed the stern warnings from the scientific community about anthropogenic climate change, Derrida predicts that the ultimate end game of our conflictual relationship is utter oblivion. The “veritable war of the species” that we are currently waging against the earth is a “war to the death” (Derrida, *The Animal* 31; 102). The philosopher maintains that we must “intervene in this war between the species” before it is too late (Naas 242). Derrida apocalyptically encourages us to envision a “tableau of a world after animality, after a sort of holocaust, a world from which animality, at first present to man, would have one day disappeared: destroyed or annihilated by man” (*The Animal* 80). The dystopian scenario outlined by Derrida draws its strength from the scientific consensus about the ecological crisis. If we continue to turn a blind eye to the biosemiotic gazes around us that are suffering because of our myopic actions, our species will also one day vanish when too many threads have been torn from the web of life. From a *semioethical* perspective, Derrida concludes that the *world war* “is passing through a critical phase [...] We are passing through that phase, and it passes through us. To think the war we find ourselves waging is not only a duty, a responsibility, an obligation, it is also a necessity” (*The Animal* 29).

Derrida’s (re-) appropriation of the expression *world war* is heavily influenced by the scientific theory of the “sixth mass extinction” connected to human activities (Wagler 78). Illustrating that the quotidian disappearance of other organisms is inherently unsustainable on an interdependent and interconnected planet, Derrida laments, “the number of species endangered because of man takes one’s breath away” (*The Animal* 26). Unless we deviate from our current *ecocidal* trajectory, thus ending this “war without mercy against the animal in the form of a *pax humana*,” *all* beings will soon perish (Derrida, *The Animal* 102, italics in original). In this regard, “the present environmental crisis and widespread extinction of animal species constitutes a new, unprecedentedly destructive turn” in human-animal relations (Baumeister 52). Derrida observes that the devastating ripple effects of our unfettered aggression against the hand that feeds are visible throughout the biotic community of life. The philosopher ponders how we will respond to the biosemiotic gaze that beckons us to co-inhabit the cosmos differently.

The moral summons extended by Bella in *Bel Abîme* takes the form of a reflection about the deadly repercussions of excessive urbanization. Whereas he used to torture flies with sadistic delight before his biosemiotic encounter with Bella, the protagonist starts to treat all living creatures with the dignity and respect that they deserve as sentient, semiotic “fellows.” The narrator becomes astutely aware that the so-called rural exodus is a major ecological problem linked to a loss of habitat for other species. Articulating his derision for urban spaces in a conversation with his lawyer related to his socioeconomic status, the protagonist declares,

Yes, I am from the southern suburbs of Tunis. The popular suburb? You are nice, popular is not really the word, rotten would be better. What’s rotten about it? Oh, pretty much everything. I’m not talking about the people, those are rotten regardless of the suburbs. Yes, that’s it, urbanization, infrastructure, land use planning. You have to come and visit us on rainy days, when the streets become torrential wadis and the sewers spew our own shit on us. (Manaï 18)

Later in the narrative, the narrator criticizes those who “have the haggard gaze of someone who does not understand why there is no longer a tiny piece of land in this fucking immensity to exist” (Manaï 86). The protagonist’s biosemiotic encounter with Bella and the friendship that ensued

induce the realization that the other species with whom we dwell are having a difficult time surviving in a drastically altered ecological landscape. Manaï “pushes us to reflect upon our own existence in the current circumstances in which we live (which) [...] leads to the unfolding of the limits of our thought and our failed acts” (“‘Bel Abîme’ dernier roman de Yamen Manaï,” my insertion). For Derrida and Manaï, we are responsible for the destruction that we are continually wreaking upon our imperiled planet.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, Derrida and Manaï’s *limitrophic* reworking of other-than-human semiosis and their reassessment of human-animal relations in general focus on the force of the biosemiotic gaze. The philosopher and Tunisian writer demonstrate that a human who *sees* and has been *seen* by the “wholly other” is no longer the same person. When we share all of the joy and sorrow that epitomizes life in its divergent forms with a non-human companion, we discover firsthand the reality of other-than-human friendship rendered possible by *interspecific* communication. As opposed to a blank stare emanating from a robotic automaton looking back at us, we are able to forge meaningful bonds with other sentient, semiotic creatures. The inner transformation that transpires through the power of the other-than-human gaze also opens the door to cross-species compassion. Without the ghost of the *animal-machine* looming over us, it is no longer possible to absolve ourselves of all responsibility for our parasitic rapport with the universe that could be described as a *world war*. Derrida and Manaï offer a stark reminder that when too many other-than-human eyes staring back at us have faded away, it could be our own extinction on the horizon.

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Notes

¹ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

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Mutual Mirroring between East and West: An Imagological Analysis of 二马 (Mr. Ma and Son)

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Abstract: The novel «二马» (*Mr. Ma and Son*) by Lao She, the only one of his works set in a foreign country, offers Chinese readers a portrayal of 1920s Britain from various perspectives. However, these portrayals should not be seen as objective representations of Britain, but rather as Lao She's own interpretation and reflection of what he saw and thought, influenced by his creative motivations and attitudes. The primary objective of the novel is to use the exotic image of Britain as a benchmark or reference point to critically examine Chinese society and its national character. By employing an imagological lens, this article reevaluates *Mr. Ma and Son*, focusing on the images of British citizens, scenes, and social ethos depicted in the novel. It argues that the deliberate shaping of these images serves to highlight the stark disparities in development and modernization between China and Britain. Through this comparison, Lao She aims to reflect the state of Chinese society and national character. Furthermore, Lao She's portrayal of Britain as a utopia suggests that he views it as an idealized model for comparison with the challenges faced by Chinese society in its modernization process. In doing so, Lao She reveals a complex mix of resentment and envy toward the British society.

Keywords: Britain, complex of resentment and envy, image, imagology, *Mr. Ma and Son*

Introduction

The novel «二马» (*Mr. Ma and Son*, hereafter referred to as *Mr. Ma*) by Lao She was serialized in 1926 in the literary magazine *Xiao Shuo Yue Bao* «小说月报» (*Fiction Monthly*) during the author's five-year stay in England. It explores the experiences of Mr. Ma Zeren and his son in British society, providing an insight into Lao She's perception of Britain and offering reflections on Chinese society through a comparison with its British counterpart.

While Lao She himself modestly claims that *Mr. Ma* lacks the grandeur and lasting impact of literature and art, considering it as nothing more than a form of newspaper literature that doesn't provoke readers' disdain (*Wo zenyang* 12), it is worth noting that critics consider it to be his most significant novel written during his time in England. Compared to his earlier works, such as *Lao Zhang De Zhe Xue* «老张的哲学» (*The Philosophy of Lao Zhang*, 1926) and *Zhao Zi Yue* «赵子曰» (*Zhao Ziyue*, 1927), *Mr. Ma* is more refined and "probably the most important novel Lao She wrote during his stay in England" (Prado-Fonts 185). This novel also marks the beginning of Lao She's career as a cultural critic and embodies his lifelong literary mission (Wen 121). As Lao She's only novel set in a foreign country, *Mr. Ma* is particularly significant in revealing the author's attitudes and perspectives towards the British people and society.

This article aims to analyze Lao She's creative style and the background behind the creation of *Mr. Ma*. It examines the portrayal of British society in the novel, encompassing the depiction of

characters, scenes, and social ethos, ultimately presenting an exotic image of Britain as the Other. This article also delves into the motivations behind these images and explores the historical and cultural context that informs them. Essentially, it conducts an imagological interpretation of *Mr. Ma*, taking into account Lao She's creative intentions and the social and historical realities of both China and Britain.

Mr. Ma: Creative Intention and Historical Background

Imagology maintains that hetero-image as national collective imagination not only reflects a society's understanding and imagination of its foreign counterparts, but also reveals the author's personal emotions and attitudes. Jean-Marc Moura argues that these images carry triple connotations: they represent a nation, a society or culture, and the writer's own feelings (25). Therefore, the hetero-images created by writers involve both objective description and the author's subjective emotions, resulting in a combination of personal sentiments and collective imaginings. By examining the images conveyed in literary works, we can gain insights into the author's attitudes and motivations behind their creations. Therefore, the purpose of studying hetero-images in literature is not to determine their authenticity, but rather to explore how these images are constructed and the reasons behind them. It is therefore necessary to revisit *Mr. Ma* and reinterpret the British image portrayed in the novel based on Lao She's creative intentions and the social and historical realities of both China and Britain.

As one of the leading writers in modern and contemporary China, Lao She possesses a unique writing style. Despite experiencing significant changes during the *May 4th Movement*,¹ Lao She maintains a certain distance from mainstream literature and is sometimes considered an observer of radical cultural movements (Wen 115). Unlike Lu Xun, who openly expresses his dissatisfaction with public mentality, or Mao Dun, who examines social problems, Lao She focuses primarily on ordinary citizens and explores their basic existence and living conditions, rather than engaging in sharp and profound intellectual criticism. His attention is directed towards individuals influenced by the times, rather than the opposing social classes. It can be said that Lao She has become a master by concentrating on the lives of ordinary citizens and the lower class (Lee 295; Zhang 30). His works are infused with concerns for ordinary people, reflecting a humanitarian and people-oriented perspective. However, this focus on ordinary individuals does not imply that Lao She isolates himself in an ivory tower.² On the contrary, he seeks to reflect on and criticize society through the lives and circumstances of ordinary citizens. He expresses his ideas through easily accessible popular works, and in his own unique way, he addresses the questions raised by the times.

In 1924, Lao She arrived in London to teach at the School of Oriental Studies,³ University of London. His several years of living abroad allowed him to observe British society in great depth. At the beginning of the 20th century, Britain was undeniably a strong and modern society. However, London society during that time was far from peaceful, having just emerged from the aftermath of World War I. The mindset of the people was complex, with various social movements and ideologies emerging. The opening scene of *Mr. Ma* vividly captures this chaotic atmosphere in a corner of London. The streets are crowded with different groups of people, each passionately expressing their beliefs. The novel also mentions a million-person demonstration and shop robberies, reflecting the social problems prevalent in London at the time.

Against this backdrop, discrimination and repulsion towards foreigners, especially Orientals like the Chinese, become particularly evident. During his five-year stay in London, Lao She must have observed many issues within British society, although he only uses them as background in the novel. His focus lies in comparing Chinese and British social conditions and examining the mindsets of their citizens. Beller notes that "our images of foreign countries, peoples and cultures mainly derive from selective value judgements (which are in turn derived

from selective observation) as expressed in travel writing and in literary representations” (5). Pageaux also points out that when creating an exotic image, writers do not simply reproduce reality but selectively choose characteristics that contribute to their description of the foreign society (138). Lao She’s portrayal of the British image follows this pattern.

The stark contrast between China and Britain is a deliberate choice, with carefully selected materials that serve clear purposes. Lao She explains that his motivation for writing this book is not solely based on the individual characters or events themselves, but rather on the opportunity to compare and highlight the differences between the Chinese and the British. In this comparison, each character in the novel represents something larger than themselves—a representation of their respective nationalities (*Wo zhenyang* 12).⁴ Lao She’s primary focus in this novel is indeed on the national identity that the characters embody, rather than solely on their individual personalities. He uses the story to highlight and analyze the challenges that China has faced in its modernization process (Mather 3). While the novel predominantly showcases the order, strength, and advancement of British society, Lao She intends to shape it as a model that the Chinese can look to for inspiration and as a guide for their own modernization efforts.

Regardless of the author’s attitude or perspective towards foreigners, the reasons behind it are enlightening in themselves (Meng 10). While *Mr. Ma* may seem to present an exotic British society to Chinese readers, underneath lies a critique of national spirit and a concern for Lao She’s own country’s fate. Although the novel revolves around the experiences of Chinese individuals in London, interpreting it from the perspective of British social conditions, daily life, and mindsets of the time offers a different reading experience. To fully understand the image of Britain conveyed by Lao She, the following sections will revisit the novel in terms of its characters (British citizens), scenes, and social ethos.

Image of British Citizens

The portrayal of British citizens in *Mr. Ma* highlights several prominent characteristics, including their superciliousness, self-conceit, and their reverence for hero and science.

The portrayal of British citizens by Lao She exemplifies their superciliousness and a clear sense of national superiority. Characters such as Mrs. Wendell, Miss Wendell, Reverend Evans, and Alexander all exhibit these traits prominently. Even minor characters in the novel display pride in their own nation. For instance, British journalists have a tendency to report on Chinese people by using pidgin English, as they struggle to conceive that others could speak proper English. Similarly, minor officials from the British Immigration and Customs exhibit contrasting attitudes towards locals and foreigners. This superciliousness and sense of national superiority are further evident in the prejudice and contempt shown towards China and its people.

The novel exposes the challenging circumstances faced by Chinese individuals in the West from a unique perspective. Chinese people have long been stigmatized in Western society as opium-smoking, sinister, and eccentric, representing the “yellow peril.” Mrs. Wendell takes pride in refusing to rent to Chinese individuals, a sentiment shared by many others. “Large or fancy hotels don’t rent to Chinese, not to mention ‘reputable’ households.” (Lao, *Mr. Ma* 27) When Ma Zeren and his son visit Mrs. Wendell for the first time, her body language, including her neck, chin, eyebrows, and fingers, vividly conveys her disdain and superciliousness.

The British citizens in *Mr. Ma* possess an innate sense of national superiority, which has been extensively discussed by scholars (e.g., Miall 12; Marchetti 2-3). They often exhibit self-righteousness and a tendency to look down upon people from other countries (Chu 173). Even an Englishman in exile would take pride in not being a citizen of another nation (Yuan and Wu 170). This attitude can be attributed to historical factors, as well as Britain’s position as an influential and powerful nation. At the beginning of the 20th century, Britain had colonies across the globe, earning it the title of “the empire on which the sun never sets.” The characters in

Mr. Ma primarily consist of ordinary citizens who, regardless of their age, profession, or educational background, generally exhibit a sense of national superiority and harbor deep-rooted prejudices and contempt, particularly towards China,⁵ a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society in the East. This is a reality that many Chinese writers residing in Britain, such as Chiang Yee and Xiao Qian, have also experienced. Lao She himself also encountered the stereotypes about China prevalent in Western society upon his arrival in Britain, which served as a significant motivation and purpose for his writing.

Western prejudice and discrimination against Chinese individuals have been attributed to a complex interplay of factors. Malcolm J. MacDonald, the former British Governor in Hong Kong, argues that a superiority complex among whites and an inferiority complex among people of color are the unfortunate consequences of Western rule in these nations (12). The issue of China's perceived weakness was further compounded by extensive and ongoing media exposure in the Western world.⁶ This publicity, which often portrayed distorted images of China and its people, can be traced back to the early sinologists and persists to this day (Chan 159). Moreover, newspapers and mass media outlets frequently blurred the lines between fiction and reality, reporting imaginative elements from fictional works as actual events (Witchard 91; Louie 1063). Mrs. Wendell and her daughter Mary initially hold contemptuous and hostile attitudes towards Chinese individuals, not out of malicious intent, but due to the misinformation propagated by the media. The novel states that China is often neglected in history courses in most English schools, and the limited knowledge people have about China is often presented in a negative light (Lao, *Mr. Ma* 25). The myths and stereotypes perpetuated in fiction, plays, and movies further contribute to this negative perception (Lao, *Mr. Ma* 187). The Wendells serve as a microcosm of London society in this regard.

Another characteristic of British citizens portrayed by Lao She is their admiration for strength and heroes. This is evident through the character of Mrs. Wendell, who idolizes a hero capable of wrestling tigers and taming wild elephants. Mary also exhibits a similar mindset, and enjoys watching movies featuring British heroes triumphing over foreigners alone. Initially looking down upon Ma Wei, she changes attitudes immediately when he displays strength by defeating the provocative Paul in a restaurant. This, however, angers Mrs. Evans, not because her son is beaten, but because a Chinese person, who was once seen as inferior, defeats a British person. This challenges the British people's sense of national superiority and their admiration for strength, leading Mrs. Evans to view it as "disgrace". In addition, the romantic relationships depicted in the novel also reflect the British mindset of hero worship. Ma Zeren and his son pursue Mrs. Wendell and her daughter, respectively, but their efforts both end in failure. Mrs. Wendell points out that the British look down on women who marry foreigners and find it mortifying when a foreigner has any romantic involvement with British women. This also demonstrates the British view on marriage, where British women are expected to marry the strong, which is a manifestation of their hero worship.

Zhu Ziqing, a contemporary Chinese writer of Lao She's time, also observes that Westerners have a strong inclination to idolize heroes (89). The British establish a connection between their powerful nation and the concept of strength embodied by heroes. Consequently, the British find it difficult to accept being surpassed by others, especially those deemed weak. Even in the realm of romantic relationships, a woman's ideal partner is expected to be a strong hero. Therefore, it is not surprising that Ma Zeren and his son's pursuit of Mrs. Wendell and her daughter faces obstacles in British society, given its aforementioned characteristics.

Lao She also clearly points out that the romances of Ma Zeren and his son are conceived intentionally in order to expose the characters' personalities and national prejudices (*Wo Zhenyang* 12). While it may initially seem that the setbacks in these relationships are due to class and racial discrimination, a deeper analysis reveals a predetermined pattern of "strong-weak" dynamics

between conquerors and the conquered in transnational romantic relationships. The “foreign man-white women” pattern in interracial relationships, as Hoppenstand suggests, symbolizes the conquest of white women’s bodies and even the entire white society (174). Similarly, Jiang notes that possessing a foreign woman symbolizes the conquest of a foreign land and reinforces the hierarchical relationship between races (43). From this perspective, the pattern of “British men-foreign women” implies the conquest of other countries by Britain, which aligns with the British national mindset as conquerors. However, the pattern of “foreign men-British women” signifies the conquest of white women by foreign men and challenges the British people’s sense of national superiority and their identity as the strong conquerors. Consequently, transnational romances with such a pattern are destined to fail and lead to frustration.

Furthermore, when considering the prevalent “Sinophobia” within British society during that era, where Chinese men were often depicted as dangerous individuals who posed a constant threat to the chastity and racial purity of white women, it becomes evident that the deliberate concealment of Chinese masculinity in the plot of *Mr. Ma* serves to bring attention to the stereotypes and prejudices associated with interracial relationships. It can be interpreted as a subtle form of resistance against these discriminatory and prejudiced notions that were prevalent in society at that time.

Another significant feature of British citizens depicted by Lao She is their emphasis on scientific knowledge. This is exemplified by Katherine’s belief that knowledge brings joy, Alexander’s transformation of his experiences into useful knowledge, Sir Simon’s pursuit of clay research, etc. The newly built city of Welwyn Garden, described in the novel, also showcases the power of science. The frequent mention of the word “science” in the description highlights the city’s foundation on scientific principles.

The British philosopher Francis Bacon famously stated that knowledge is power. In the case of Britain, it can be argued that their emphasis on and utilization of scientific knowledge played a crucial role in their rise as a powerful nation. The origin of the first industrial revolution in Britain, for instance, can be attributed not only to social, historical, and cultural factors but also to their relentless pursuit of and application of scientific knowledge. In contrast, Chinese society lacked the same pursuit and thirst for scientific knowledge. China, at the time, was in a semi-colonial and semi-feudal state, where feudal ideology still held significant influence. Feudal concepts such as propriety, righteousness, and integrity often clashed with modern education, science, and knowledge. While the *May 4th Movement* in China championed science, the aggression of foreign powers and years of civil war hindered its peaceful development and impeded the spread of scientific and technological knowledge. Consequently, there was a clear contrast in the pursuit and utilization of science and knowledge between China and Britain. Chinese people did nothing but “merely cry out and wave banners without actually applying themselves to do anything,” while the foreigners were equipped “with cannons, planes, science, wealth and knowledge” (Lao, *Mr. Ma* 373).

Indeed, the exotic image portrayed in the novel stems from the prosperity and strength of the British Empire, serving as a stark contrast to China’s poverty and weakness. In *Mr. Ma*, Lao does not engage in indiscriminate praise or criticism of the British. Instead, he presents a nuanced depiction that blends both positive and negative aspects of their society.

Image of Scenes

Lao She contends that scenes are deliberately arranged in works, even those that do not primarily focus on the background, to depict emotions and attitudes before describing the actions of the characters, emphasizing their purposeful inclusion rather than being written for their own sake (*Wo Zhenyang* 139).

In accordance with Lao's perspective, the depiction of scenes in the novel must be targeted. "Whatever scenes we would like to write, whether they be artificial landscapes, gardens, or barren mountains and seas, we must pre-determine their roles in the whole work." (Lao, *Wo Zhenyang* 140) This viewpoint is also evident in *Mr. Ma*. This section focuses on the presentation of scenes in the novel, including the natural countryside, foggy city, sea of cars, and dining environments, which serve as examples of different settings, encompassing urban and rural, artificial and natural, indoor and outdoor elements.

The British city depicted by Lao She is presented as an idyllic, modern, and livable place. Welwyn Garden City, visited by Ma Wei and Li Zirong, exemplifies a human settlement built on scientific innovations, resembling a beautiful and orderly garden. "Small flower gardens dotted the town [...] Nearly everything in the city was natural" (Lao, *Mr. Ma* 539). The author's depiction of this ideal place to live should refer to Ebenezer Howard's vision and practice of the "garden city." Lao She attributes the city's cleanliness, peace, and harmony to scientific advancements that have eliminated the traditional cluttered and noisy image associated with urban areas. Moreover, the British countryside is also portrayed as unique and captivating. The natural scenery of the countryside evokes a sense of tranquility, leisure, and harmony between nature and humanity. Far from the hustle and bustle of the city, the countryside is depicted as green, natural, and serene. In this environment, there is a seamless integration between man and nature, devoid of the traditional notions of poverty and backwardness. It can be inferred that such a paradise-like setting represents the author's ideal vision.

When describing London in the early 20th century, it is inevitable to discuss the topic of fog. Many Chinese writers residing in Britain, such as Xiao Qian, Chiang Yee, Zhang Ruogu, Liang Qichao, and Xu Zhimo, have provided detailed accounts of the fog in London. During the creation of *Mr. Ma*, Lao She coincided with a period of severe environmental pollution in major British cities. In the winter of 1924, Lao She personally witnessed the most severe fog in London in 34 years, which brought the entire city to a standstill (Witchard 70). The portrayal of the fog in the novel is both vivid and extensive, as Lao She dedicates a whole paragraph, comprising over 400 words, to depict the foggy weather in London from various perspectives (Lao, *Mr. Ma* 363–365). The foggy weather in London, as a distinct feature of the modern city, is not solely attributed to natural factors but is also closely tied to the industrialization that characterizes British society. As Britain led the way in undergoing two industrial revolutions, the extensive use of coal resulted in significant smog production. Combined with London's unique humid and rainy climate, this gave rise to the well-known haze, earning the city its moniker as the "city of fog." Beyond environmental considerations, the varying shades of fog described in the text, such as "light gray," "dark gray," "grey-yellow," "red-yellow," and "yellowish," reflect the advanced industrialization of Britain. This widespread industrialization serves as a hallmark of social modernization.

The car serves as another important symbol of modern industrial civilization. When Ma Zeren arrives on the streets of London for the first time, he finds himself surrounded by a "sea of cars." Standing there, overwhelmed by the multitude of vehicles, Ma Zeren is surprised to discover that the car, which in China symbolizes status and privilege, has already become a part of ordinary people's daily lives in London. In addition to cars, Ma Zeren also experiences other modern modes of transportation such as buses, trams, and the underground system in London. The author juxtaposes the concepts of "car first" and "people first" in the two countries, revealing contrasting attitudes towards privilege and equality between the two cultures. This also highlights the significant disparity in the development of modern transportation between China and Britain. It is worth noting that the proliferation of cars in London is a result of the highly developed industrialization in Britain. Being at the forefront of the "Steam Age" and "Electric Age," Britain witnessed a tremendous increase in productivity, and industrial products, including cars,

became accessible to the general population, no longer limited to a privileged few. In response to the overcrowding of cars, London implemented modern traffic control methods. However, in China, cars were still a rare luxury, symbolizing “official importance” during that time. This stark contrast highlights the significant development gap between China and Britain.

Furthermore, Lao She also guides readers on a tour of restaurants in London, showcasing another aspect of social differences between the two countries. The indoor dining environment exemplifies this contrast. When Ma Wei visits the “lowest of London’s greasy spoon,” he is surprised by the crystal-clear and well-maintained tables and chairs, the vibrant and lively atmosphere, the cleanliness of the food, the well-presented waitstaff, and the quiet and elegant ambiance. He finds it hard to believe that such a dining environment exists in the lowest-tier restaurant in London, let alone in other establishments. This stark contrast leads him to compare it with the unsanitary dining environments of similar establishments in Beijing. The author also expresses similar criticism through the character of Alexander. “Some people had told me that Beijing was an attractive place, but I certainly couldn’t see it; filth and beauty just don’t mix” (Lao, *Mr. Ma* 203–205). Overall, British restaurants are portrayed as clean and tidy, which is appreciated by both locals and the Chinese characters in the novel. On the other hand, Chinese restaurants are depicted as relatively messy in the narrative.

Overall, the novel acts as a mirror, reflecting the image of Britain as an orderly and modern country. The depiction of its attractive natural scenery, peculiar foggy climate, bustling car-filled streets, and pleasant dining environments presents Britain from various angles—natural, orderly, clean, harmonious, and peaceful. Simultaneously, the novel illuminates the stark contrast between Britain’s high level of industrialization and productivity and the devastated state of early 20th-century China, which was grappling with internal and external conflicts, characterized by poverty, backwardness, filth, and chaos.

Images of Social Ethos

During his five-year stay in Britain, Lao She had the opportunity to immerse himself in the daily life of the British, an experience that he reflects in his works. In *Mr. Ma*, British society is generally depicted as having modern working concepts, including a strong sense of time, a fast-paced lifestyle, and a focus on the importance of rest. Additionally, the novel also highlights British society’s prominent awareness of rules and norms.

Firstly, the British society portrayed in the novel exhibits a strong sense of time. As Lao She writes, “The average person must keep his life right in step with the ticking of the clock” (Lao, *Mr. Ma* 263). This is evident in the brisk strides of Reverend Evans, who is over sixty years old, and in Mary’s innovative way of walking, which is described as a “cross between running and twisting.” The British view time as synonymous with money, and work is seen as the means to create wealth. Emerson also observes this characteristic of the British, noting that they walk and ride with a sense of urgency, as if driven by pressing matters (61). British society also values working long hours as a way to maximize time, as exemplified by Sir Simon. Despite being in his seventies and retired, Sir Simon continues to engage in chemical analysis in the laboratory every day, echoing the sentiment that “if everyone were to put fifty, well, who would take over running things in the world?” In stark contrast to this, Ma Zeren, representing old China, lacks a proactive spirit. Despite being under fifty, he displays a passive demeanor and lacks the ambition to make a living. He indulges in leisure activities and daydreams of becoming an official, failing to understand the British concept of time. When witnessing the British in a hurry, he criticizes them for lacking composure. However, he fails to realize that he lacks the positive and enterprising spirit demonstrated by Reverend Evans, Sir Simon, and others.

Secondly, the British society portrayed in the novel generally embraces modern working concepts and emphasizes independence. Characters such as the Evanses, Sir Simon, Alexander,

Mary, and Lincoln all have their own careers and pursuits, highlighting their sense of independence. Lao mentions in “My Landlords” that ordinary British citizens are hardworking, clean, and hold their work in high regard (*Laoshe quanji* 66). Chu also shares similar views,⁷

The sincerity the British shows in their work is rarely comparable. When the British work, they not only exert their full energy, but also their full capacity ... The various facilities have done their best to be as fast as possible, so as not to delay the passengers’ time. We see office staff, company secretaries and shop assistants rushing all the way. That kind of tense atmosphere and that kind of spirit of trying best to get to the office before the office hours really take my breath away. No sooner do they enter the office than they immerse themselves in work, never reading irrelevant newspaper, chatting, or writing personal letters. They have developed a traditional “work for work’s sake” spirit, never wanting to be interrupted by others while working, and never wanting to loaf on the job. (157)⁸

British citizens value their work not only for the financial independence it provides but also for the sense of personal self-worth it brings. This understanding of the importance of work is deeply ingrained in the social and historical development of Britain. Through work, ordinary citizens can strive for financial and social independence while also contributing to the nation’s overall wealth and prosperity. This stands in stark contrast to Ma Zeren, who is solely focused on becoming an official. He believes that there is no greater dignity than being a member of the “ruling class,” which would exempt him from the need to work. Additionally, despite the equal employer–employee relationship in British society, Ma Zeren still clings to his official dream and views himself as the master, while seeing Li Zirong as nothing more than a servant. This hierarchical mindset rooted in the importance of officials conflicts with the modern employment concepts upheld by Li Zirong, highlighting the clash between Chinese and British work ideologies.

The modern work philosophy of British society is also evident in their attitudes toward rest and vacation. Lao She specifically includes the “summer vacation” event to highlight the social differences between the two countries. When summer comes, Mrs. Wendell plans to go to Scotland, while Mary wants to enjoy a carefree time at the seaside. The streets of London are also bustling with travelers and buses, creating a cheerful atmosphere. Each time Ma Wei witnesses scenes like this, he feels a deep sense of envy and longing. On one hand, the availability of travel and summer breaks for the general population is contingent upon a prosperous and stable society. On the other hand, the presence of leisure time for rest is only possible when increased productivity liberates the workforce. In contrast to Britain, modern Chinese society lacked the foundation for summer vacations due to ongoing wars and social upheaval, leaving its citizens struggling to make ends meet. In a society where individuals were compelled to toil tirelessly for their livelihood, the notion of vacation was merely an illusory luxury. This stark contrast in attitudes towards work and rest unveils the disparities in social development and productivity between China and Britain. Essentially, this phenomenon serves as a reflection of the turmoil and backwardness that characterized Chinese society during that era.

Furthermore, British society, as depicted by Lao She, demonstrates a general adherence to rules that deeply influences the British people and contributes to the effective functioning of their society. While Ma Zeren expresses his dissatisfaction with the apparent “lack of composure” among the British people as he observes the bustling streets of London, the readers, on the other hand, perceive a different reality. They witness the orderliness and equality in the British traffic system. The British have a deep appreciation for freedom, and interestingly, this freedom does not lead to chaos but rather to a sense of order and organization. Moreover, modern legal awareness, exemplified by institutional norms, permeates all aspects of British social life. Whether it is dealing with “dog affairs” or “people affairs,” British society consistently demonstrates a legal consciousness. More importantly, the public actively utilizes the law

to protect their own interests. For instance, when Washington breaks his engagement with Mary, everyone advocates for a “legal solution.” In contrast, contemporary China lags behind in terms of institutional norms. As a result, people’s behavior is more restricted by loose moral and ethical norms. Furthermore, in a society marked by frequent political regime changes and foreign aggression, ensuring the fairness of institutional and legal designs and implementations becomes challenging.

Closing Remarks

Imagology asserts that hetero-image and auto-image mirror each other. This *spectant-spected* relationship between the self and the Other presents a dynamic interplay between the two. When one observes the Other, the image of the Other also shapes the image of oneself as the *spectant*, speaker, and writer (Leerssen 22; Pageaux 157). The identity of the self is constantly affirmed through the interaction with the Other, and the image of the self is established through the mutual reflection with the image of the Other. Thus, the image of a foreign country as the Other can be seen as a mirror of the self, and when a literary work portrays the Other, it is also, in a sense, portraying the self. By placing Chinese people in a foreign environment, Lao She compares the cultures of Britain and China, showcasing British citizens, scenes, and society from a unique perspective. This portrayal of Britain serves as a reference to reflect on China and mirror Chinese society and its national character.

In his depiction of London through the lens of Beijing, Lao She examines the daily life of British society as an ordinary citizen, offering readers a glimpse into the everyday life and mindset of British society. Zhou Ning, in his analysis of the historical Sino-Western relationships spanning 2000 years, argues that China has held a complex view towards the West. While China has shown admiration for Western achievements and has sought to learn from them, this admiration has been accompanied by a sense of resentment, and China has never fully embraced the West as its utopia without reservations (Zhou 5). Similarly, *Mr. Ma* presents mixed attitudes towards British society and its people. While acknowledging the order, civilization, technology, and institutional design in Britain, it also resists the prejudice, discrimination, distortion, and denial of the East by British society. This creates an ambivalent blend of resentment, envy, inferiority, and rejection. Wang Yichuan further supports this view, stating that if China’s classical experience is characterized by a self-centered heavenly empire illusion, its modern counterpart is marked by a blend of resentment and envy (74). The sight of industrious citizens and a prosperous and powerful foreign society reminds the writer of the poverty and weakness of his homeland and the aggression of Western powers, thus fueling resentment. He resents the sluggishness, apathy, and lack of entrepreneurship among his countrymen, as well as the powerlessness and helplessness of his motherland in the face of Western invasions. However, it is this very resentment that fuels the desire and envy for a strong, unified, and enterprising modern China. This complex interplay of resentment and envy permeates the novel. Drawing upon the concepts of imagology, Lao She’s portrayal of Britain can be characterized as both utopian and ideological.

Zhao argues that in the 20th century, the Chinese went to the West to be students, while Westerners came to China to be teachers (2). Lao She is no exception. Despite being a lecturer at the University of London, he is a student observing and studying in the vast classroom of British society. When discussing the creation of *Mr. Ma*, Lao She humbly states that his work falls short of capturing the spirit of the British people (*Wo Zhenyang* 14). This statement, modest in nature, questions whether the depiction of British people and society in fiction accurately reflects reality or whether the images presented in the text align with the actualities. However, the creation of hetero-images is not merely a portrayal of reality; it also incorporates the attitudes, emotions, and collective imaginings of the creator and their society. The hetero-image

of British society presented in *Mr. Ma* encompasses the author's fervent emotional investment. It is not just about exoticism, but rather about the reflection of an auto-image and the author's endeavor to examine Chinese society, critique its national character, and foster a spirit of entrepreneurship.

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Notes

- ¹ The reference to the *May 4th Movement* pertains to the significant period around May 4, 1919, during which China experienced a notable anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement. This movement marked a pivotal turning point within the broader *New Culture Movement*, which aimed to challenge traditional norms and usher in a new era of Chinese modern literature.
- ² A notable characteristic of Chinese modern literature is its emphasis on social movements and revolutions, reflecting the continuous turmoil and transformations experienced by Chinese society and political regimes in modern times. Many prominent writers tend to focus on a broader societal dimension, seeking solutions to social issues and a way forward. However, Lao She stands out as an exception. His exploration of social issues begins from the perspective of everyday life, living conditions, and the mentality of ordinary citizens, with less emphasis on revolutions or large-scale movements.
- ³ It is today known as School of Oriental and African Studies.
- ⁴ The original text reads: “写这本东西的动机不是由于某人某事的值得一写，而是在比较中国人与英国人的不同处，所以一切人差不多都代表着些什么；我不能完全忽略了他们的个性，可是我更注意他们所代表的民族性”。
- ⁵ Katherine is probably the only exception.
- ⁶ For instance, there are numerous novels, such as those by Sax Rohmer and Thomas Burke, as well as films like “Piccadilly,” “Mr. Wu,” “Shanghai Express,” and “Dragon Lady,” that reflect similar perspectives.
- ⁷ Chu was the former Editor-in-Chief of *Guangming Daily* (a nationally influential newspaper in China), and the Deputy General Manager of Xinhua Bookstore (the largest and only country-wide bookstore chain brand in China). He studied at the University of London for several years, just as Lao She taught there.
- ⁸ The original text reads: “英人在工作时之认真，鲜有伦比。英人工作时，不仅施展出他们全部的能力（energy），并且施展出他们全部的能力（capacity）... 但各种设备已极尽迅速之能事，决不致耽误乘客之时间。但我们看到那些机关职员、公司书记、商店伙计，一路的赶路，抢着向前跑，那种紧张的气氛，那种用全副精力要想在办公时间以前赶到办公室的精神，实在令人心折。他们一入办公室，立即埋头工作，绝不看报、谈天，或写私人的信件。他们已养成一种传统的”为工作而工作”的精神，决不愿在工作时被人打扰中断，也决不自己偷懒稍息。”
- ⁹ The original text reads: “20世纪，中国人到西方，是去做学生的...西方人到中国，是来做老师的”。

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Modern Psychology and the Loss of Transcendence

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Since its inception, modern Western psychology has gradually cut itself off from its metaphysical and ontological roots. This is evidenced, in part, by a shift from using words such as *soul* or *psyche* to an almost exclusive use of *mind*. This process of severing the human soul from the spiritual dimension is, in large part, due to the emergence of the modern world and its secularizing outlook (which took root in the European Renaissance, continuing through the Scientific Revolution and culminating in the Enlightenment project). The concept of *psychology* is roughly 500 years old, yet – as a subject of study and practice – it is much older than the word itself, which can readily be seen when we consider the worldview of ancient peoples. Curiously, having rejected transcendence and the intermediary realm of the soul, the discipline today fails to be a psychology in the best sense of the word, such that it can truly benefit humanity.

The secularizing trajectory of Western culture culminated in the twentieth century when psychology went from being a “science of the soul” to one that had become completely profane. Accordingly, it “shuts out all ‘transcendence’ and so also shuts out all effective spirituality.”¹ Furthermore, “Modern psychology ... dismisses ... all that transcends it.”² This decisive turn was championed by behaviorism and psychoanalysis – the foundational paradigms of the discipline; yet this degradation of its outlook and assumptions occurred long before these developments emerged within modern psychology. Rather, the catalyst was a declaration of psychology’s independence from a metaphysical and religious perspective on what constitutes a human being. Due to the current spiritual malaise, it has been aptly observed that to comprehend humanity today, we need a sound knowledge of mental health: “To understand modern [and by extension postmodern] man, it may well be appropriate to study psychology.”³

Among the spiritual traditions of the world, we find unanimous agreement that the tripartite constitution of the person – and of the cosmos of which we are but a mirror – comprises Spirit, soul, and body; or the spiritual, psychic, and corporeal states. The dominance of the unseen world proclaimed by the spiritual traditions (and their corresponding psychologies) was gradually overthrown and replaced by the more tangible demands of the sensorial world and its empirical modes of knowing, represented by the modern West’s culture of materialism. What may be self-evident at one level is not so on a higher one, for lower levels cannot encompass what lies beyond them; only the higher can know the lower. While the reductionist position ostensibly shuns metaphysics, embedded in its argument is a hidden metaphysic of its own; one that implicitly attacks any suggestion of a reality that transcends the psycho-physical order. In doing so, it has transgressed its own conceptual assumptions.

Due to the marginalization of spiritual considerations in modern psychology, there is a profound confusion between the psychic and spiritual orders. The phenomenon of *psychologism* has thus become unavoidable – the tendency to sublimate the objective metaphysical order and thus reduce our understanding of human consciousness to the level of a purely subjective phenomenon. Furthermore, there is the aberration known as *scientism*, which is not an observance of the scientific method *per se* but an ideology that has transgressed the limits of its own inherent limitations as confined to the empirical order. The founder of the “talking cure,” Sigmund Freud

(1856–1939), declared his allegiance to scientific fundamentalism, epitomizing this overreach in the following words: “No, our science is no illusion. But an illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give us we can get elsewhere.”⁴

There are two trends in modern psychology, with its post-Enlightenment prejudices, of which we ought to be vigilant. Both trends confuse the psychic and the spiritual, but in different ways. René Guénon (1886–1951) explains: “In the first, the spiritual is brought down to the level of the psychic ... in the second, the psychic is on the other hand mistaken for the spiritual.”⁵ A paragon of Islamic spirituality, Rūmī (1207–1273) pointed out that “The soul is one thing, and the spirit is another.”⁶ In verbatim agreement, St. Augustine (354–430) writes: “The soul is one thing, and the spirit ... is another.”⁷

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) defined the soul as “the first principle of life in those things which live.”⁸ Seneca (c. 4–65) says: “What else could you call [the] soul than a god dwelling as a guest in a human body.”⁹ Elsewhere Augustine confirms the divine origin of the human psyche and its reliance on the Spirit: “This soul which [has] its origin from the breath of God could not exist without [the] intellect [which] is the spirit.”¹⁰ Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240), the Spanish-born mystic known as “the Greatest Master” (*al-Shaykh al-Akbar*), observes that our true vision requires both reason and intellect in order to “distinguish the in-between from the in-between”¹¹ or what constitutes the intermediary realm of the psyche.

According to sacred psychology, the macrocosm and the microcosm reflect each other. This is conveyed in the Hermetic maxim: “In truth certainly and without doubt, whatever is below is like that which is above, and whatever is above is like that which is below.”¹² In this process of cosmic mirroring, the human psyche is a miniature of the cosmos (or *microcosm*). The Sufi master Shaykh ad-Darqāwī (d. 1823) writes:

The soul is an immense thing; it is the whole cosmos, since it is the copy of it. Everything which is in the cosmos is to be found in the soul; equally everything in the soul is in the cosmos. Because of this fact, he who masters his soul most certainly masters the cosmos, just as he who is dominated by his soul is certainly dominated by the whole cosmos.¹³

The levels of reality that exist – both within and without us – are unified in the Absolute. Traditional “sciences of the soul” allow for all realms of consciousness to be known directly: “[I]n the very place where the lower worlds are, there are to be found the higher worlds and the totality of worlds. It has been said that there exist ten thousand worlds, each one like this world ... and all of these are contained in man, without his being conscious of it.”¹⁴

The soul is a mystery; it is immersed in time while also being rooted in the timeless. The human body participates in time and space, whereas the Spirit transcends both. The psyche belongs to the intermediary realm between body and Spirit, but partakes of each dimension. Humanity’s spiritual traditions all attest that the intermediary realm of the person is of Divine origin. Plato (429–347) insists that “the soul is absolutely immortal and indestructible.”¹⁵

According to the Abrahamic monotheisms: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7). The Qur’ān declares that God created Adam from clay – “I breathed into him My Spirit” (15:29) – and that the “Lord created you from a single soul” (4:1). Muslim philosopher Mullā Sadrā (1572–1640) points out that “The soul is the *junction of the two seas* ([Qur’ān] 18:59) of corporeal and spiritual things.”¹⁶ That the heart-intellect is the center of the human psyche was also taught in the Christian tradition by Meister Eckhart (1260–1328): “There is something in the soul that is uncreated and uncreatable ... [and] this is the intellect.”¹⁷

There are dimensions of the soul that not only bring us closer to the corporeal order, but which are also transcendent. Because it is situated between the Spirit and the body, the intermediary realm is difficult to fathom and thus requires a certain metaphysical discernment. Eckhart explains: “At the highest point of his ... soul, man is more God than creature.”¹⁸ Plato

identifies the transpersonal faculty of the Intellect as “the highest part of the soul,”¹⁹ which is synonymous with the spiritual dimension in all beings. The *Vedānta* (or *Brahma*) *Sūtras* articulate a similar concept: “The soul can have a double nature, that of the supreme and that of the individual soul.”²⁰ Correspondingly, our primordial nature or innermost Self is synonymous with the heights of the soul.

The English poet and Anglican divine Thomas Traherne (c. 1636–1674) declares: “As my body without my Soul is a Carcase, so is my soul without Thy Spirit, a chaos, a dark obscure heap of empty faculties: ignorant of itself, unsensible of Thy goodness, blind to Thy glory: dead in sins and trespasses. Having eyes I see not, having [ears] I hear not.”²¹ Every facet of reality is hierarchically ordered with its levels and modes of knowing – without recourse to the transcendent, lower orders of reality invariably become opaque and distorted.

Again our physiology is dependent on the soul, and our bodies and souls (in turn) are grounded in the Spirit. In the same way that the body cannot function without the soul and Spirit, the same can be said for modern psychology. According to St. Makarios of Egypt (c. 300–c. 390), “[T]he soul, which is a subtle body, has enveloped and clothed itself in the members of our visible body, which is gross in substance.”²² However, the human soul requires the body to manifest itself and cannot do so without it. Furthermore, throughout humanity’s spiritual traditions, the human body is viewed as a theophany and is understood to be the locus of the Spirit. For example: “The body, the house of the Spirit”²³ (Chāndogya Upanishad 8:7–12) and our “bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19).

We recall the memorable words of Eckhart, who said: “God create[d] the world ... [so] that God might be born in the soul.”²⁴ But this does not mean that the human psyche is independent of the Spirit; the soul is completely reliant on the spiritual domain for all things. Likewise, our identification with the transcendent clearly implies immanence as we see in the following Patristic formula: “God became man that man might become God.”²⁵

The Divine immanence is recognized across all religions: “The kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21), “I am the Self ... seated in the heart of all beings”²⁶ (Bhagavad Gītā 10:20), or “Heaven and earth cannot contain Me, but the heart of My faithful servant containeth Me” (*ḥadīth qudsī*). This is based on a metaphysical understanding that there is a prior acknowledgment of the Divine transcendence that makes it possible to access God within oneself (in a manner not limited to the psychological level). Eckhart clarifies this distinction: “God alone is free and uncreated, and therefore he alone is like the soul with respect to being free, but not with respect to uncreatedness because the soul is created.”²⁷

The tripartite structure of Spirit/Intellect, soul, and body is known in Latin as *Spiritus/Intellectus*, *anima*, and *corpus*; in Greek as *Pneuma/Nous*, *psyche*, and *soma*; and in Arabic as *Rūh*/*ʿAql*, *nafs*, and *jism*. The Arabic term *ʿaql* is used to denote both reason and intellect, although the distinction and interrelation between them (the first being horizontal and the second vertical) is always recognized. *Rūh* and *ʿAql* are found to be synonymous with spirit and Intellect. The *nafs* (soul, self, or ego) is often conflated with *Rūh* or Spirit, as is evidenced by these terms being used interchangeably; however, they represent two very different ontological functions of the self. The “heart” and the “intellect,” in a traditional context, are also synonymous with Spirit; for this reason, they are sometimes referred to as the “heart-intellect.”

The Old Testament upholds the belief that human beings are a composite of Spirit, soul, and body. We see this, for example, in Genesis: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (2:7). Each person, according to the Jewish tradition, consists of *neshamah*, *ruah*, and *nefesh*. During its terrestrial sojourn, our higher soul (*neshamah*) longs for its return to the Spirit, while our reasoning soul (*ruah*) acts as an intermediary between the upper and lower realms, concerning itself with what is good and evil; while the animal soul (*nefesh*), our lower dimension, is linked to instincts and bodily cravings.

In the Christian tradition, references are made to the threefold constitution of the human being in St. Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians: "May the God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly; and may your *spirit and soul and body* be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Christian psychology recognizes that the human being is created in the "image of God" (Genesis 1:27) and that the Divine calls us to become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4) by identifying this indwelling Spirit within ourselves with what is everlasting and "not of this world" (John 18:36). According to St. Paul, "he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him" (1 Corinthians 6:17) – a reference to our chief end in this life; namely, the soul's return to its divine origin.

In the Islamic tradition, the Spirit (*Rūh*), while transcendent, is also immanent within the soul (*nafs*) of the human being (*al-insān*) and, when the faculty of the Intellect (*'aql*) is restored in the heart (*qalb*), our primordial nature (*fiṭrah*) can be consummated at the highest level. The intermediary realm is known within Islam as the 'isthmus' (*barzakh*) between the Spirit (*Rūh*) and body (*jism*). Within Sufism, this tradition's mystical dimension, there are four degrees of the human psyche: ascending from the animal soul (*an-nafs al-haywānīyah*); the passionate soul (*an-nafs al-ammārah* or "soul that incites" to evil); the discerning or intelligent soul (*an-nafs al-lawwāmāh* or "soul that blames"); and the intellective soul (*an-nafs al-mutma'innah* or "the soul at peace," the human psyche reintegrated in Spirit or *Rūh*). The "science of the soul" that belongs to the Islamic tradition is rooted in the prophetic saying, "He who knows himself knows his Lord."

In the Hindu tradition, the Spirit (*Purusha*) or Self (*Ātmā*) manifests as the individual soul (*jīvātma*), which is enveloped by five sheaths (*koshas*). The Spirit transcends each of these yet includes them at the same time. They are listed here in descending order, from the highest to the most 'dense.' The first envelope (*ānandamaya-kosha*) is the Spirit, the next three (*viññānamaya-kosha*, *manomaya-kosha*, and *prāṇamaya-kosha*) pertain to the intermediary realm, and the final one (*annamaya-kosha*) corresponds to the corporeal.

Notwithstanding its nontheistic character, the Buddhist tradition also speaks of an intermediary realm. The *trikāya* doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism envisages the nature of reality by means of three 'bodies' or *kāyas*: *Dharmakāya* ("universal body"); *Sambhogakāya* ("body of bliss"); and *Nirmānakāya* ("body of transformation"). It is the *sambhogakāya* that corresponds to the intermediary realm of the human psyche. There is a cosmological corollary between the *trikāya* and the 'three worlds' (Sanskrit: *triloka*) pertaining to the celestial, atmospheric, and earthly realms.

In Buddhism, each of us is said to comprise five psycho-physical aggregates or "heaps" known as *khandhas* in Pāli (Sanskrit: *skandhas*): (1) form (Pāli/Sanskrit: *rūpa*); (2) sensation or feeling (Pāli/Sanskrit: *vedanā*); (3) perception (Pāli: *saññā*; Sanskrit: *saṃjñā*); (4) mental formations (Pāli: *saṅkhāras*; Sanskrit: *samskāras*); and (5) consciousness (Pāli: *viññāna*; Sanskrit: *viññāna*). However, the existence of these aggregates does not preclude the presence of an abiding, universal Self in all beings considered as the immanent aspect of ultimate reality (Pāli: *Attā*; Sanskrit: *Ātman*) beyond birth, old age, sickness, and death. The Buddha does not take issue with the Hindu understanding of the Self as *neti, neti* ("not this, not that") which, by means of negation, conveys an apophatic understanding that transcends all determinate conceptions, leaving only the consciousness of that which is – the Self alone; all that is not this, can be considered "non-Self" (*anattā*).

An integral psychology informed by metaphysics and a sacred science recognizes two aspects of human identity: one relative or horizontal, and the other Absolute or vertical (while never blurring or confusing the two). This is made clear in Buddhist interpretations of mind. The following passage from *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna* is instructive:

Mind, though pure in its self nature from the beginning, is accompanied by ignorance. Being defiled by ignorance, a defiled [state of] Mind comes into being. But, though defiled, the Mind itself is eternal and immutable. Only the Enlightened Ones are able to understand what this means.

What is called the essential nature of Mind is always beyond thoughts. It is, therefore, defined as “immutable.” When the one World of Reality is yet to be realized, the Mind [is mutable and] is not in perfect unity [with Suchness]. Suddenly, [a deluded] thought arises; [this state] is called ignorance.²⁸

An integrated mind sees both the mirror and the images that are reflected in it. Our original state of consciousness – unconditioned by the images of the phenomenal world – is able to envision an abiding unity behind all forms. Huang Po (d. 850) discusses this transpersonal dimension in the following passage:

All the Buddhas and all sentient beings are nothing but the One Mind, beside which nothing exists. This Mind, which is without beginning, is unborn and indestructible. It is not green nor yellow, and has neither form nor appearance. It does not belong to the categories of things which exist or do not exist, nor can it be thought of in terms of new or old. It is neither long nor short, big nor small, for it transcends all limits, measures, names, traces and comparisons.... Only awake to the One Mind....²⁹

Some have attempted to trace the rudiments of a sacred psychology to what Freud referred to as the “oceanic feeling”³⁰ in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). Yet this venture is misplaced because the Freudian “talking cure” is, at its core, anti-spiritual and opposed to metaphysics. The “oceanic feeling” for Freud likely refers to the primary narcissistic state of union between an infant and its mother, and certainly not a unitive state with the Absolute. Although appearing to be more friendly towards the spiritual traditions and their “science of the soul,” neither does the work of Carl Jung (1875–1961) refer to the transpersonal order; rather, its perspective is altogether confined to the intermediary realm of the human psyche.

Whitall N. Perry (1920–2005) illustrates why psychic phenomena are so seductive and difficult to discern: “The confusion is between the psychic and spiritual planes of reality, where the unfamiliar, the strange, and the bizarre are mistaken for the transcendent, simply by the fact that they lie outside the ordinary modes of consciousness.”³¹ This recognition appears to be missing from the standard professional literature, and in any of the discussions related to understanding the intermediary realm. Guénon elaborates on these dangers:

It is impossible to be too mistrustful of every appeal to the ‘subconscious’ ... in a sort of ‘cosmic consciousness’ that shuts out all ‘transcendence’ and so also shuts out all effective spirituality ... but what is to be said of someone who flings himself into the ocean and has no aspiration but to drown himself in it? This is very precisely the significance of a so-called ‘fusion’ with a ‘cosmic consciousness’ that is really nothing but the confused and indistinct assemblage of all the psychic influences ... these influences have absolutely nothing in common with spiritual influences.... Those who make this fatal mistake either forget about or are unaware of the distinction between the ‘upper waters’ and the ‘lower waters’; instead of raising themselves toward the ‘ocean above’, they plunge into the abyss of the ‘ocean below’; instead of concentrating all their powers so as to direct them toward the formless world, which alone can be called ‘spiritual’, they disperse them in the endlessly changeable and fugitive diversity of the forms of subtle manifestation ... with no suspicion that they are mistaking for a fullness of ‘life’ something that is in truth the realm of death and of a dissolution without hope of return.³²

All religions teach that there is an inseparable link between human beings and the Divine. Indeed, they see their task as having us awaken to our primordial nature (*fitrah*), the “image of God” (*imago Dei*), Buddha-nature (*Buddha-dhātu*), or Self (*Ātmā*) – our true identity *in divinis*. This traditional doctrine of identity is closely related to the image one has of Reality itself. It is the metaphysical order that restores harmony to a consciousness that has been bifurcated into mind and matter (or subject and object), which also allows for the discernment of the intermediary realm.

At the root of the crisis in modern psychology is the “Cartesian bifurcation,” the dualism between mind and body (along with matter) that has plagued the mindset of the West since the seventeenth century. As a result of this myopic outlook, human beings are severed from reality and everything becomes objectified, further entrenching the psyche in a subject-object dichotomy. The Cartesian divide between *res extensa* (‘extended entities’) and *res cogitans* (‘thinking entities’) makes no allowance for overcoming this bifurcation, thus reducing all human experience to the private, subjective realm and destroying any notion of objective reality. This perpetuates the illusion of a fragmented worldview and an isolated self, which sunders our relationship to the sacred. This mind-body dualism lives on in modern science, especially in the fields of psychology and psychiatry, where this notion is deeply embedded in its epistemological framework. It is especially to be found in the *medical model* of clinical diagnosis and treatment of mental illness, which separates the psychological (*psyche*) from the biological (*soma*). It is the metaphysical order that restores harmony to a consciousness that has been distorted by dualism.

Across the diverse traditional cultures of humanity, this pernicious bifurcation does not exist, as they all recognize that we comprise Spirit, soul, and body. Within each of the world’s religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and the traditions of the First Peoples – there exists a corresponding psychology that is fully integrated and grounded in the sacred. At the heart of each authentic psychology, there lies a “science of the soul” that can bring about a psycho-spiritual transformation that is essential to healing our damaged psyches: “Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). The term *therapy* comes from the Greek word *therapeía* (‘healing’) yet, for the purposes of this discussion, it is not only we who are in need of restoration but also the discipline of psychology as a whole, along with its mental health systems.

Although psychology today has begun, to some degree, to incorporate spiritual practices into its secular framework and is becoming more open to these approaches, it still has a long history of pathologizing religion. Furthermore, modern Western psychology continues, in large part, to view itself as the only valid way of knowing the mind, thus implicitly rejecting the validity of other approaches to this discipline. This is an acutely problematic situation that has not been fully understood, which means it cannot be properly remedied until the root causes of this crisis are clearly identified.

While one can certainly find some common ground between the spiritual psychologies and their modern aberrations, no integration between the two is possible without asking the following question: Is modern psychology able to accommodate the sacred in its worldview? As it stands, the foundations of modern psychology are vitiated by the exclusion of a spiritual dimension in its epistemology and praxis. If this trajectory continues unabated, modern psychology will never become a fully integrated “science of the soul.”

Contemporary psychology had its genesis with the advent of psychoanalysis and behaviorism. All the movements and schools that came after them were simply prolongations of these two pioneering forces which have not, as many assume, disappeared into the annals of history. The question that arises is whether modern psychology and the field of mental health can be extricated from this deformed superstructure. We need to be vigilant about giving preference to the tenets of modern psychology over those of humanity’s spiritual traditions if we are committed to reviving an authentic “science of the soul” as an endeavor distinct from modern psychology.

As human beings have both a body and a mind, it is important that we first attend to our corporeal nature and explore, with patients, their bodily health prior to determining a mental health diagnosis. Once a physical cause has been ruled out, a person’s mental health can be further assessed. At the same time, maintaining awareness of the fundamental mind-body unity and its relationship to the tripartite structure of Spirit, soul, and body at all times is central to any spiritually-informed therapeutic approach. Each effective sacred psychology is sustained by the

transpersonal order which facilitates an integration that does not rely on the ego. In contrast, mainstream psychology (and psychiatry) do not – by and large – take into consideration the spiritual dimension. Their attempts to reduce the human being to merely a psycho-physical entity, devoid of what transcends these limitations, will only yield a fragmented understanding. This approach may, in some cases, produce a temporary cure or remove some unwanted symptoms, but it does not constitute true healing.

It is only by embracing a more spiritually integrated psychology that the discipline can be saved from itself. All spiritual traditions teach their own version of the famous inscription found at Delphi – “Know thyself” (*Gnóthi seautón*) – yet such realization is only possible if we are able to restore the practice of healing souls to its transcendent origins.

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Notes

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- ³² René Guénon, "The Confusion of the Psychic and the Spiritual," in *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), pp. 239–240. See also Rama P. Coomaraswamy, "The Problems that Result from Locating Spirituality in the Psyche," *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, Vol. 9 (Summer 2002), pp. 101–124.

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Adding or Removing Clarity?

Hegel, Hassan Massoudy and the Reason of Arabic Script and Calligraphy

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In the third part of his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, Hegel famously claims that “alphabetic writing is in and for itself the more intelligent form” (*Philosophy of Mind*, 197), as it directs “the mind’s attention ... to the spoken word and its abstract elements,” allowing meaning to express itself “immediately and unconditionally” (198). There, Hegel is advocating primarily against Chinese ideograms, but as it will be shown in this paper his views entail also the superiority of alphabetic scripts over abjad writing systems, such as that of the Arabic language (1). The paper thus contrasts Hegel’s ideal of written signs as transparent conveyors of meaning with the inherent logic of the Arabic script as it emerges in the calligraphic tradition, suggesting that, from another perspective, a certain interruption of immediate intelligibility can in fact intensify meaning and clarity. In particular, the works by the Iraqi calligrapher Hassan Massoudy are taken as examples of such intensifications and somehow as practical meta-reflections on the peculiar “reason” operating in Arabic script (2). Finally, Hegel’s remarks on the graphic signs will be reconsidered to ascertain why this kind of reason is rejected (although partially glimpsed) by him and what limits it can highlight as to his way of thinking the relation between writing and language (3).

Hegel, the Alphabetic Writing and the Arabic Abjad

At least since Plato’s criticism of writing, Western philosophy has often argued—or at least assumed—that writing is subsidiary to oral speech. Notoriously, Derrida commented at length on this (1978, 1982, 1997, 2004), specifically identifying Hegel as a prominent figure of this “phonocentric” tradition (*Of Grammatology*, 97–8; *Speech and Writing* 123–4). For the philosopher of German Idealism, reason is expressed more adequately in speaking than in writing, since the written language relies more heavily on sensibility and thus tends much more than voice to “sterilise or immobilise spiritual creation” (*Of Grammatology*, 25). As a matter of fact, “the objects perceived by the eye ... persist beyond the perception of their sensible, exterior, stubborn existence; they resist the *Aufhebung* and do not let themselves as such be relevés by temporal interiority” (*The Pit and the Pyramid*, 92).

Quite interestingly, the idea of the “privilege of sound in idealization,” as Derrida puts it (*Of Grammatology*, 98), leads Hegel to even sketch a comparison between writing systems, based on how closely each of them is connected to the phonetic *logos*. In §459 of the third part of his *Encyclopaedia*, in particular, he contrasts “alphabetic writing” with what he calls the “hieroglyphic script,” whereby the latter does not refer to the Egyptian hieroglyphs (a form of writing combining pictographic and phonetic elements, as Hegel knew [see *The Philosophy of History*, 219; Stewart 185–9]), but to the (to his knowledge) purely pictographic system of Chinese writing.¹

Expectedly, Hegel declares a univocal preference for the former over the latter: “*hieroglyphic script* designates *representations* with spatial figures, whereas *alphabetic script* designates *sounds* which are themselves already signs” (*Philosophy of Mind*, 196).

Hegel’s argument against hieroglyphs is based on a fundamental idea of his philosophy: *concepts are superior to images in capturing reality*. It is not that images cannot convey any rationality at all, but conceptually articulated rationality has a higher degree of mediation and therefore greater completeness than visually articulated rationality. The relative inadequacy of images compared to concepts also entails that graphic signs used in writing are less adequate whenever they draw attention to themselves rather than to the concepts they convey: the more transitive a sign is—i.e., the more its sensible appearance disappears while performing its function—the more adequate it is. Hieroglyphs are considered defective semiotic devices precisely for these reasons: instead of univocally referring to the constitutive elements of spoken words—which are in turn signs of concepts—, as the alphabetic script does, they translate with their own visual bodies the relations of the world into images (so that the meaning of a series of pictograms can be well understood without knowing the spoken word to which they correspond).² In so doing—Hegel argues—they do not provide any significant rational articulation, but offer themselves as sensible representations that must themselves be rationally deciphered. This greatly limits their potential complexity and effectiveness in grasping reality.

Within this framework, it could be legitimately wondered how Hegel would judge an abjad script such as that of Arabic and Hebrew, that is indeed phonetic but does not write all its sounds—indeed, only consonants and long vowels. This question remains unanswered in his texts, and yet it is interesting to speculate on it for at least two reasons: first, because it helps us understand better Hegel’s point on writing, which risks being to some extent oversimplified within the limits of this binary opposition between alphabetic and pictographic signs; second because, even setting aside Hegel’s critical horizon, it paves the way for a philosophical understanding of the peculiar rationality connected to this form of writing—a topic that is currently addressed only in the context of cognitive sciences (see Al-Hamouri, Xuehu et al.).³

To start—quite obviously—the phonemic character of abjad script already places it one step above the pictographic logic of hieroglyphs. An abjad written sign indeed involves the mediation of voice to reach its intended meaning, and its semiotic chain thus articulates itself in two steps and three stages, just like that of any sign e.g., in the German language: (1) the written sign “علم” refers to (2) a sound, /ilm/, which then refers to (3) a meaning, “science.” Differently from what happens with German or Greek, however, not all of the read sounds have their 1:1 counterpart in the written form of the word—notably, the “i,” being a short vowel, needs in this case to be integrated by the reader. What makes the semiotics of abjad signs distinct from that of alphabetic signs is this non-automatic passage from 1 to 2.

One could easily object that this is often the case with English as well. Indeed, I maintain that from a genuine Hegelian point of view, languages such as English display a “less pure” alphabet-language systems than languages, such as German, Latin or Greek, that render their phonemes unambiguously and exhaustively (on this, see e.g., Kittler 109). Arabic language, nonetheless, poses at least one additional problem that arises only to a lesser extent in English. In Arabic, different readings of the same written word quite often lead to different meanings, so that “علم”, for instance, can be read as well as /ʕalima/ (“he knew”), /ʕallama/ (“he taught”), or /ʕalam/ (“sign, flag”). Only the context decides on how the word is actually to be read,⁴ and such decisions must implicitly be taken for a good part of the words in the sentence, given that e.g. conjugations and declensions largely rely on unwritten phonemes (“كتب” potentially being /katabtu/, “I wrote,” /katabta/, “you [m.] wrote,” /katabti/, “you [f.] wrote,” /katabat/, “she wrote,” /kutibat/ “it was written,”....). Of course, English as well as has cases such as “read” (/ɹi:d/ [present tense] and /ɹɛd/ [past tense/past participle]) or “close” (/kləʊz/ “to close”, and

/kləʊs/ “close” [= near]), yet they are statistically so few as to hardly affect the experience of reading English as a whole.

The process of comprehension taking place in languages like Arabic thus involves a constant back-and-forth between the level of the written sign (1) and that of the meaning (3). The written sign (1) often opens up different reading options (2a, 2b, 2c....) referring to at least as many meanings (3a, 3b, 3c...), and it is only the whole meaning of the relevant context that definitely binds the sign to its actual reading (e.g., 2a). Whereas German *always* and English *nearly always* have one and only one reading for each of their written signs, in Arabic there is very often no automatic coincidence between script and reading: reading itself poses an interpretation problem.⁵

As the media theorist Friedrich Kittler observes in a text that deeply engages with §459 of Hegel's *Encyclopaedia*, the intrinsic interpretability of abjad script opens the doors to misunderstandings and, what's more, to potentially deceitful usage of the written language (107-9). From Hegel's standpoint, this feature of course makes abjad script less perfect than Latin-based alphabets—which, historically speaking, evolved as an integration of it (specifically, of the Phoenician abjad, see Crystal 202). If the best script is supposed to represent a clear sequence of sounds according to a fixed pairing between graphemes and phonemes, then abjad is just a partially satisfying device, as it allows for multiple and phonetically equally legitimate readings. Like hieroglyphs, though obviously not to the same extent, “the analysis” of abjad written signs “appears to be possible in the most various and divergent ways” (Hegel 2007, 197). The material, visual elements of the abjad, much more so than those of German letters, resist full permeation by reason and force the reader to engage with the very *Daseyn* of the written word.

Hegel's framework apparently leads us to consider the necessity of this engagement negatively as the imperfection of a system that has not attained the clarity of European alphabets. In what follows, however, it is precisely this idea that will be challenged, by trying to consider the peculiarity of Arabic writing starting from some other basis than conceptual transparency, and specifically trying to pay heed to the eminent valorisation of the virtues of this script allowed by the tradition of Arabic calligraphy.

A Way of Making Truth Clearer: Arabic Calligraphy

Everything that has been said so far in Hegel's terms about Arabic abjad writing system could be said a fortiori for that particular configuration thereof which is calligraphy (*al-khat*). If the abjad sign is itself opaque and does not immediately refer to a sound, calligraphy goes even further in this direction: instead of valuing the mere transitivity and instrumentality of the written word, it turns the latter into an artistic object; calligraphy (καλῶς γράφειν) is *beautiful* writing as much as it is *meaningful* writing. Examining the exact relation between these two dimensions—the aesthetic and the semiotic one—iuxta propria principia, that is, from within the categories and the perception of the world where these calligraphic practices arose, can thus be interesting to assess whether Hegel's ideal of a purely semiotic sign can be contrasted to another point of view on writing—a point of view that maybe does not consider the image-quality of script as a mere obstacle or source of ambiguities in the transmission of meaning.

Notoriously, the importance of calligraphy in the Arab-Islamic context could hardly be underestimated. Whereas figurative arts traditionally popular in the West such as painting and sculpture have largely been banned on religious grounds, calligraphy has always been promoted as a noble art, and its history has to some extent woven with that of Islamic devotion itself. If “Allah is beautiful and loves beauty,” as a well-known hadith reads, for sure calligraphy, together with poetry, is the cultivation of beauty *par excellence* (Safavi 34-5; Puerta-Vilchez 88-91). As a matter of fact, calligraphers often gained recognition in the courts and were granted a special social and economic status, for dignifying “writing”—and most notably, the writing of the

Holy Qur'an—was regarded as an extremely prestigious task;⁶ sometimes, they were also part of Sufi confraternities, as the world of letters was recognised—much like in Jewish Kabbalah—a profound mystical meaning (see Schimmel 77–114). What this all makes clear is that calligraphy has never been perceived as a purely decorative art, that is, as a practice that employed words to produce mere aesthetic effects. The teaching of calligraphy has constantly been guided by strict ethical principles connecting the “purity (*tahārah*) of writing” with the “purity of the soul;”⁷ moreover, the visual effect of calligraphic works has always been supposed to also serve the meaning, and not to be an end itself. A fundamental aesthetic principle throughout the history of calligraphy has been that, however complex, the calligraphy must preserve all the elements of the words and therefore remain potentially readable (see Puerta-Vilchez 222–3). After all, apparently not so differently from Hegel's ideal written sign, calligraphy is in Ibn Khaldūn's definition “a drawing and design of letters that represent the spoken words.” (Ibn Khaldūn 487)

Nonetheless—and here lies perhaps its most interesting side—, the beauty of calligraphy is not just supposed to serve the meaning, but to exalt it and let it shine more than clear writing allows to. This is where Hegel's discourse is no longer compatible with the world and claims of the Arabic calligraphers. One of the most prominent of all times among them, Ibn Muqla (ca. 885–940), despite adopting a very terse writing style, explicitly states that the criterion of beauty is superior to that of clarity (see Murād).⁸ An even more authoritative source, none other than the Prophet's cousin Alī ibn 'Abī Ṭālib, implicitly subverts Hegel's ideal by stating that “beautiful writing makes the truth clearer” (Atiyeh 142). It is not that the meaning elevates, and ultimately overcomes, the sensible appearance of the sign, which in turn ought to be as plain and inconspicuous as possible in order to simply release its meaning; rather, the sensible appearance of the sign is thought of as something that can make its meaning clearer. Concretely, the sign contributes to the clarity of the truth not only in its being meaningful but also in its being beautiful.

The relation between script and reason or truth thus works quite differently in the Arabic calligraphy and in Hegel's view: the latter regards the written sign as a device to codify the spoken words—in which truth first delivers itself—and hence has a purely instrumental criterion to judge it (“is the sign able to univocally evoke a distinct sound?”); in contrast, the former considers the articulation of the written word as part and parcel of the disclosure of truth, which is supposed to be tied to writing no less than to voice. But how does this participation occur? And what has this discourse about calligraphy to do with the abjad script in general? Answering the first question will hopefully bring out the answer to the second question too. Yet, Arab calligraphers and calligraphy theorists are seldom explicit as to how “beautiful writing” actually “makes the truth clearer.” This is where briefly considering a case study may actually help.

The choice of taking into account the contemporary artist Hassan Massoudy (1944–), born in Najaf (Iraq) and working in Paris since 1969, is—like any choice—of course to some extent arbitrary. Yet, I think, it finds more than one plausible justification. Firstly, and most trivially, he is widely recognized as one of the most prominent heirs alive of the millennial calligraphic tradition; secondly, he has commented himself on his artistic practice in aesthetic terms, which is relatively uncommon among calligraphers but extremely precious for our inquiry; thirdly, having lived in France for quite a long time has allowed him to formulate these reflections with an unprecedented sensibility to the specifically Western aesthetic lexicon, which again is welcome in an attempt to sketch a comparison between Hegel and the “reason” of calligraphy; fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, his works display in a just particularly vivid way virtues and features of the calligraphic act that can be than recognised in the repertory of the calligraphic tradition as a whole.

When we look at Massoudy's works as well as to his own remarks (many publications have integrated selections of both, see e.g. Massoudy 1986, 2002, 2017, 2020), we realise that the first

way in which calligraphy establishes a privileged relation with truth is through what I would call an “aesthetic intensification.” The calligrapher’s endeavour may be seen as that of making the written words he/she is portraying more resonating and aesthetically powerful, that is, more capable of immediately touching upon our senses than they are in their ordinary vocal or written expressions.⁹ Massoudy loves putting this in terms of energy (*Calligraphe*, 121) or breathing (46). The calligrapher “inspirates” from the outside the emotional vibrations of the meaning that he is going to write, lets this energy mature and expand inside himself (“concentration” is, not by chance, another key word of Massoudy’s art, see 81), and then unleashes it together with the ink on the paper. Such a way of proceeding borders on the experiences of Islamic mystic, as Massoudy himself repeatedly admits in commenting his series of calligraphies on Ibn ‘Arabī (*Perfect Harmony*): both involve the transfiguration of ordinary experience into the infinite realm of imagination, as well as the effort to bring back this vision—or just a fragment thereof—and let it appear. “In the calligrapher’s eyes, in the depths of his head,” he writes, “all kinds of calligraphic signs and shapes float. With his hand and inked reed, he tries to deliver his images on paper” (*Calligraphe*, 84).

Such a detour—from the meaning to its imaginal transfiguration, and from there back into the matter of writing—allows the meaning hidden in the writing to somehow become sensorially visible in the matter and shapes of writing itself.¹⁰ This visibilisation, of course, neither is nor can be “neutral” in any sense of the word, but is always coloured by the emotional *Stimmung* of the artist, who accesses the meaning with his/her own eyes. Somehow, the intensification realised by the calligraphy grants precisely the possibility of interacting with a meaning that is no longer just entrusted to the silent universality of interwoven concepts, but has become a “seen image.” As spectators, we are touched by the vividness of a meaning embodied in one of its thousand possible bodies (91), and we feel invited to share this interplay of transfigurations first-hand.

Like any calligrapher, Massoudy achieves this visibilisation by working on the disposition (that is, on the rhythm of full and empty spaces), the cut of letters (which involves a certain material craftsmanship of the calamus) and, not least, the colour(s) of his calligraphy. More specifically, however, his calligraphic poetic, so to speak, is characterised by an extensive use of focalisations. Notwithstanding other deep stylistic variations between his earlier (1986) and later (2002, 2017, 2020) works, Massoudy always shows a peculiar tendency to highlight certain characters—often a single word—more than others. That word often takes on a special role in the aesthetic balance of the composition, for it becomes the “focal point” or the “dominant note” from which the emotional and imaginal charge of the calligraphy springs forth. In his most recent pieces in particular (but there are also earlier examples, see *Calligraphe*, 62–3), Massoudy has consolidated a scheme that puts a sentence, mostly a quotation, on the bottom of the paper, with a single word from it in the middle of the composition as the largest and most elaborated part of the work. Interestingly, the word is usually not easily readable by itself, with the result that in the aesthetic experience of the calligraphy one gets *first* a generic attunement thorough this (still meaningless) set of lines and void, *then* moves to the quotation and relates this tune to a linguistic meaning, and *finally* sees the meaning fade again into the lines. The endless circularity between meaning and forms works like a resonance box for the aesthetic vibrations of the former, that allows us to delve deeper and deeper into its imaginal potential and opens it up to inexhaustibly new shades. Thereby, meaning is unfolded—continually made more “unclear” but, indeed, in a way that “makes it clearer.”

The De-coincidence and the “Sign as Sign”

Performatively as well as theoretically, Massoudy offers an alternative way of thinking about the relation between writing and meaning, that does not start from the Hegelian premise that the former is a mere “ladder” to the latter. To finally address the second of the two fundamental

questions, however, it can be asked whether and to what extent this artistic dynamics of calligraphy can be extended to the Arabic script as a whole. Is it not just Arabic calligraphy, after all, that transforms the attention drawn to the written sign into such a powerful intensification of meaning? The pervasiveness of Arabic calligraphy in Arab culture and even in Arab everyday life—from newspapers to shop signs, from book titles to building decorations—as well as the particular suitability of the Arabic script to the calligraphic practice—its characters remaining recognizable even after significant deformations—are naturally aspects that very well indicate a continuity between the discourse on calligraphy and that on writing, but they do not yet capture the essential point: whether what makes the Arabic calligraphic resistant and potentially alternative to Hegel's paradigm of the alphabetic script has some root in the very form of the Arabic abjad. My contention is that indeed the “aesthetic intensification” of Arabic calligraphic art as we have just described it is allowed precisely by that feature of the latter that would be despised by a genuinely Hegelian gaze: its relative in-dependence from (or, as I will prefer, de-coincidence with) voice.

As mentioned, whereas in (purely) alphabetic languages the relation between graphemes and phonemes is immediate, and so the problem of meaning never affects the dimension of writing, Arabic written words often need a preliminary assessment of meaning in order to be voiced. Consequently, much more often than their alphabetic counterparts, abjad words end up being perceived explicitly as “signs” and produce an interruption—however short—of immediate intelligibility (the brain dynamic of this process is well described by Al-Hamouri et al.). The German speaker can easily forget that he/she is dealing with graphic lines and dots, and never actually raises the question of their relation to spoken words; the Arabic reader, on the contrary, is quite familiar with the effort of making sense of writing. Such a “de-coincidence”—as I would like to call it¹¹—between writing and voice in Arabic qualifies as hermeneutic, i.e. as requiring a collaboration of understanding, the very act of reading: voice springs only as the result of a projection of meaning, and not as a given datum; or to put it more even more clearly, reading without comprehension is necessarily impossible.

The main consequence of this hermeneutic character of reading abjad is a peculiar insistence both on the materiality of the graphic sign—which is not reduced to a mere encryption, but must be interpreted—and on voice—which is not simply there, but must be *voiced*. In a way, voice transcends the sign, yet the sign—clearly appearing as such—cannot be definitively obliterated by voice.¹² This irreducibly problematic relation between the two terms is arguably one of the decisive factors behind the flourishing of calligraphy. If this art has thrived so well in the Arabic world—I believe—it is because it does not create anything foreign to the semiotic logic of abjad writing, but “simply” dwells in the margin of de-coincidence that the language itself opens up. The calligrapher ultimately shows more conspicuously than the ordinary writer what Arabic constantly puts before the eyes of its reader, namely the “matter that constitutes” the written sign, its “birth under the pressure of the calamus” (*Calligraphe*, 109), and the laborious emergence of the voice that strives to speak it. Of course, Massoudy—for instance—practices with particular intensity this “exercise of death and life on the sentence” (7): he brings the word back to its ink materiality, kills it in its immediate intelligibility and so makes it vibrate as *the sign of a voice that is not yet there*; yet, this aesthetic operation is ultimately allowed by the original vibration of a writing that is *always* calling for a voice. Such a vibration—the outcome of de-coincidence between voice and writing—is the innermost proprium of the Arabic abjad script.

Needless to say, Hegel is completely deaf to the reasons of this material writing. The possibility of maintaining some sort of divarication between the sign and *its* voice is so far from what he considers a successful form of script that, quite to the contrary, he wants the graphic sign to abandon its character of conscious representation (*Vorstellung*) in order to become a transparent presentation (*Darstellung*) of its vocal reference—that is to say, he wants the sign to lose as much

as possible its opacity. To be clear, this ideal does not entail any preference for icons, indexes, or symbols, i.e. for signs that are more naturally connected to what they are supposed to stand for. Signs that are unrelated to (that is, *free from*) any natural connection to their reference are considered more spiritually elevated by Hegel; and yet, these signs can advance even further in their spiritual development if they cease to explicitly appear for what they are. The sign must fade into its signifying; even more, signifying must fade into the clear exposition of the signified itself.

In §458 of *Encyclopaedia*, which immediately precedes the paragraph on the alphabet, Hegel speaks of the (dead) body of the graphic sign as animated by the (living and) foreign soul (*fremde Seele*) of the meaning. Crucially, this body and this soul are not involved in an “exercise of life and death” that leaves both in their mutual de-coincidence; rather—to counter Massoudy’s image with the words of Sarah Horton, a scholar who in a recent article has taken up and valorised Derrida’s critique of the Hegelian philosophy of writing—, “the body must die and become a tomb in order to fix spirit’s attention on the soul or, in other terms, on the ideality that, crucially, is not present” (101). The body must paradoxically be sacrificed to the spirit in order to make room for life, and Hegel believes—perhaps not without reasons, given what has been discussed so far—that the alphabetic body lends itself particularly well to this sacrifice.

What Hegel never takes into account is the possibility of a reason *of* the body, i.e. *of* script, as such—a reason that does not reach the material, the ink, from the outside, but comes from its very depths. The reason *in* writing is never a reason *of* writing, for Hegel, since the body of script must ultimately coincide with—and fulfill itself in—the original reason of the soul/voice: “Though the *Aufhebung* is both a cancellation and a preservation,” as Horton notes, “the body must still be subordinated to ideality. The *Aufhebung* is supposed to unite the intelligible and the sensible in some higher unity while preserving their differences, yet this unification still presupposes an original ideality” (99).

There is, in fact, one point in §459 where Hegel seems to momentarily consent to the logic of de-coincidence; at a closer look, however, this is actually the passage that distances Hegel most radically from any form of (calli)graphic reason:

[L]earning to read and write an alphabetic script is to be regarded as an inestimable and not sufficiently appreciated educational instrument, in that it diverts the mind’s attention from the sensorily concrete to the more formal aspect, the spoken word and its abstract elements, and makes an essential contribution to laying and clearing the ground for the subject’s inwardness. Later too, ingrained habit effaces the peculiarity of alphabetic writing, that it appears to take, in the interest of vision, a roundabout route to representations by way of audibility; habit makes it a hieroglyphic script for us, so that in using it we need not have the mediation of the sounds before our consciousness, whereas people who are little accustomed to reading speak aloud what they read in order to understand it in its sound. (198)

Hegel acknowledges that learning to read and write the alphabetic script has inherent pedagogical value, to the extent that it teaches us how to grasp the spiritual content of the corporeal—how to abstract, as he states shortly after. As our acquaintance with the script improves, he observes, we no longer see graphemes as signs of sounds, and so we lose this “roundabout route to representations by way of audibility:” the alphabetic signs becomes hieroglyphs. *Prima facie*, it might seem that Hegel considers this new stage a regression compared to the one in which we see the graphic signs as a signs—and hence that the de-coincidence of the sign with its content is indeed spiritually fruitful—but it is precisely the opposite:

Besides the fact that with the facility that transforms alphabetic script into hieroglyphics the ability in abstraction gained by the initial practice remains, hieroglyphic reading is for itself a deaf reading and a dumb writing; it is true that the audible or temporal and the visible or spatial each has its own foundation, initially of equal validity with the other; but in the case of alphabetic script there is only one foundation, and in fact it stands in the correct relationship: the visible language is related

to the audible only as a sign; the intelligence expresses itself immediately and unconditionally by speaking. (198)

As a matter of fact, the “hieroglyph” into which the alphabetic sign *turns* with habituation is entirely different from the “hieroglyph” that the Chinese character *is*: the former is such due to the full-fledged coincidence between the audible and the visible (“there is only one foundation”), the latter, due to the complete lack of any relation between these two dimensions (“each has its own foundation”). Hence, the phase of de-coincidence in which the learner of the alphabetic script momentarily finds him/herself can certainly be regarded as an advancement compared to the latter, but is just as certainly a step back compared to the full, immediate and unconditional intermingling of writing and voice corresponding to the former—where by “full intermingling,” as seen, we must obviously mean “full animation of script by voice.” Hegel aims to separate the problem of meaning from the issue of writing, in the sense that he wants writing to be a mere codification of a thought unfolding as voice. That’s why the hieroglyph of the alphabet is the highest form of script in his ranking: it is so coincident with its sound to no longer be perceived in its materiality.

Compared to this scheme, the reason of Arabic script and calligraphy, insisting so much on the written sign as a sign, and considering its materiality as productively unavoidable, represents an extremely compelling objection, which forces us to ponder whether the relationship between writing and voice is “susceptible of being thought also in reverse (*à rebours*)” (Caramelli 82). Viewed from the perspective of calligraphy, in fact, the alphabetic hieroglyph does not seem very different from its pictogrammatic equivalent: both are evasions from the game of de-coincidence; both refuse to see the spoken language emerge from the written sign and establish itself precisely in the effort of being read.

If Hegel seeks to deliberately conceal the fact of linguisticity and confine us in the *natura naturata* of a language that we never truly see *emerging* from letters, the calligraphy of the Arab masters and the script from which it draws its strength bring us to the *natura naturans* of a language that suddenly gives voice to still silent signs. The clarity of the alphabetic character, so coincident with the voice as to eclipse itself in its reason, is obtained at the price of sacrificing the sign-being of the sign and with it the privilege of us as readers to take a step back and wonder at what precedes and exceeds spoken linguisticity. In contrast, the vowel-less, readable but not yet read writing of Arabic claims its peculiar clarity in making itself seen, and thus resisting the *Aufhebung* that wants the body reduced to the law of the soul: in the abjad, the voice arises and resonates as the miraculous articulation of a meaning that was not there before. Its de-coincident reason is less infallibly logical, and therefore also less anthropological than that of the alphabetic script, and the open game of its yet unfulfilled readability can lead us to where every (alphabetic) dialectic, without acknowledging it, begins: in the human endeavor of creating signs, in the im-possible—indeed, imaginal—proximity of voice and things.

Notes

- ¹ Accordingly, the Egyptian civilization is reserved a more advanced position in the history of philosophy than the Chinese one in Hegel's lectures on the history of philosophy (see *The Philosophy of History*).
- ² At least in this regard, Hegel was objectively right, see Swanson 2020. Oddly enough, as Swanson points out, this possibility of understanding the script without being able to actually read it aloud curiously holds for Chinese written language as a whole, even though Chinese has in fact some phonetics components, i.e. characters representing syllables or sounds (55).
- ³ Interestingly, these studies suggest both elements of strong discontinuity (see Al-Hamouri) and of substantial continuity (see Xuehu et al.) between Arabic and Latin-alphabetic languages in terms of the neural processes involved both in learning and reading them, which confirms that the question of the cognitive equivalence between abjad and alphabetic scripts is presently far from any univocal solution.
- ⁴ Arabic can actually disambiguate such cases by integrating special diacritic signs: for example, /ʕilm/ can be written as “علم” and thereby be univocally distinguished from /ʕallama/ “علم”. However, this integration, called تشكيل (*tashkil*, lit. “formation”), is concretely adopted only in very specific contexts, i.e. in writing the Qurʾān (where ambiguity can not be admitted), dictionaries (that specifically need to clarify ambiguous cases) and in didactic texts (conceived for readers that are not familiar enough with the language). For the scope of this paper, I am thus considering Arabic abjad script as it is adopted in standard communicative situations. By the way, the very fact that standard language renounces this *tashkil*, which could very much make Arabic work the same way as a Latin or Greek alphabetic language, witnesses that Arabic language practices are not bothered by the process of meaning disambiguation as much as a Hegel's understanding of script would assume them to.
- ⁵ Recent cognitive studies have indeed observed different patterns of brain activation connected to the act of reading resp. Arabic and Latin-alphabetic languages, notably with reference to a higher involvement among Arabic speakers of the right side of the brain, which is capable of holding different meanings for the same word during a wider range of time (see Al-Hamouri).
- ⁶ Together with Schimmel's work—focusing more on the intersections between (1) calligraphy and mysticism and (2) calligraphy and poetry—the most important studies on the history of Arab calligraphy in its social, material and stylistic aspects remain those by Sheila Blaire (2006) and Martin Lings (1976). These shall be supplemented by the book by José Miguel Puerta-Vilchez (2017) for an overview of Arab-Islamic aesthetics.
- ⁷ On this, see for instance the interesting considerations by a prominent theorist of the Middle Age such as Abū Ḥayyān Al-Tawḥīdī (ca. 922–1023; Puerta-Vilchez 223–8).
- ⁸ Also the contemporary calligrapher Hassan Massoudy, with whom I will soon deal, is clear in this regard, as he states that “whoever looks at a calligraphy perceives first the plastic aspect, and only then the meaning,” adding that “often the information is confused by aesthetic effects” (see *Calligraphie*, 27; see also H. Massoudy/I. Massoudy 40).
- ⁹ Massoudy—and he is not alone (see Schimmel 120; Blair 600)—often draws a more or less explicit parallel between calligraphy and music from this point of view, in that both these arts involve the extraordinary rendition of the ordinary (the written word, the spoken word) and obtain their “aesthetic intensification” through a peculiar mastery of rhythm and proportions.
- ¹⁰ After all, the “realm of imagination (*mundus imaginis*),” as Corbin very well shows, is conceived in Islamic mystics precisely as the junction point between the sensible and the super-sensible world, being the place where the supersensible can become a “sensible perception” (9).
- ¹¹ I take “de-coincidence” as an intermediate concept between coincidence and disconnection, and I freely borrow it from François Jullien (2017, 2020), who, however, mostly employs it in a more dynamical sense to designate the intentional act of de-coinciding. De-coincidence refers in my usage to a relationship based on a non-absolute, and therefore fruitful gap, which allows to put the related terms in perspective: to recognize them as distinct and for what they are, and yet not abandon them to the solitude of their ipseity. Abjad writing is de-coincident in the sense that at every moment it *is* and *is not* the voice that animates it, or in other terms, the voice that animates it always remains perceivable as something that “inhabits” it. It is precisely the fruitfulness of de-coincidence—I argue—that allows the creative gesture of the calligrapher: the latter does not reopen an otherwise static, immediate identity, but opens up and makes more conspicuous (indeed, intensifies) the non-absolute distance between script and voice.

¹² This double, asymmetrical relation of course lends itself particularly well to be charged—and has in fact been charged—with religious parallels (see Schimmel 78–81).

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Idols that Have Mouths but Do Not Speak: Levinas's Critique of Art between Platonism and Jewish Aniconism

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In Levinas's production, the text most openly discussing the value of art is certainly "Reality and its Shadow", published for the first time in 1948 in the journal *Les Temps Modernes*, directed by Jean-Paul Sartre. At the time of its publication, the article and its author received harsh criticism due to the allegedly simplistic and anachronistic nature of the accusations addressed against art. As Richard A. Cohen explains, this judgement is also shared by several contemporary scholars,¹ who describe Levinas's critique of art "as both narrow-minded and denunciatory, both false and hostile" (152). In this essay, Levinas openly complains about the hypertrophy that aesthetics had acquired in the post-war French cultural background. More generally, he blames Western thought, especially in its Heideggerian tendencies, for seeing art as the place for the eminent manifestation of truth.

In recent times, he states, art has ended up assuming the status of "metaphysical intuition" *par excellence* ("Reality and its Shadow" 1), and artists have been acknowledged as eminent mediums for the knowledge of the absolute. In other words, Western thought gave the work of art a sort of ontological priority concerning Being itself. In this way, it became "more real than reality": in contemporary Western thought, Levinas observes, surrealism is not something alternative to realism but a form that represents its superlative degree. These considerations are brought forward through a comparison between the Western experience and that of the Jewish spiritual world, which proclaims the prohibition of representation.

As several scholars point out, however, Levinas does not start his analysis by immediately contrasting between Jerusalem and Athens. Rather, he believes that, at the beginning of their philosophical development, they express an original agreement on the subject of art. In particular, authoritative scholars as Aaron Rosen (371) and Jacques Rolland describe Levinas's judgment on art and aesthetics as remarkably similar to the critique expressed by Plato, the eminent founder of Western thought. In this respect, Jacques Rolland even says that Levinas's Platonism is very "strict, if not intransigent" (233).

The fundamental contention of this paper is that this concordance is merely apparent or at least partial. Levinas indeed finds useful arguments for his refusal of art in Plato but considers this Platonic criticism completely insufficient. Even more paradoxically, he judges Platonism and the seeds that it sowed in the Western philosophical tradition as responsible for the hyper-valuation that art has gained among his contemporaries.

1. Apparent Harmony: Levinasian Platonism

The first Platonic consonance is announced in the title: the main thesis is that art establishes a world of darkness and confusion by replacing each object with its image. From Levinas's perspective, the pictorial image functions as an inverted symbol, for it has no sign function

but rather blunts any relationship of signification. Thus, art causes a definitive swamping in an “exotic” dimension which, despite the promises of escaping toward a proper dimension of transcendence, collapses into the hither side of the world and into the hither side of Being:

Is to disengage oneself from the world always to *go beyond*, toward the region of Platonic ideas and toward the eternal which towers above the world? Can one not speak of disengagement on hither side?... To go beyond is to communicate with ideas, to understand. Does not the function of art lie in *not understanding*? Does not obscurity provide with its very element and a completion *sui generis*, foreign to dialectics and the life of ideas? Will we then say that the artist knows and expresses the very obscurity of the real? (“Reality and its Shadow” 2-3).

In this passage, evident congruities with Plato emerge: first, Levinas seems to have in mind the well-known Platonic criticism according to which the works of the artists, the μιμηταί, are three times further from the truth (“τρίτος τις ἀπὸ βασιλέως καὶ τῆς ἀληθείας πεφυκώς, καὶ πάντες οἱ ἄλλοι μιμηταί”, Plat., *Resp.* 10.597e). The darkness generated by this removal from reality is then described—both by Levinas and by Plato—precisely through the metaphor of shadow: the most evident reference is the famous allegory of the cave (Plat., *Resp.* 7.514a-514e) in which the prisoners, chained and unable to move, cannot recognize shadows as such and are led to believe that the shadows, not the light source that produces them, are reality (Plat., *Resp.* 7.515c).

Nevertheless, the most interesting consonance in this respect is to be found in the aforementioned Tenth Book: when debating about the ontological statute of representations, Plato focuses on a particular form of art, that is to say, σκιαγραφία,² a term which means chiaroscuro painting or, more literally, “shadow-writing” (Plat., *Resp.*, 10.602d). Σκιαγραφία does not represent things as they are in their authentic ontological structure, Plato says, but as they *appear* to the senses in their phantasmatic profile. Just like a form of witchcraft (γοητεῖα), it has the power to cast a sort of spell on the viewer and produces temporary confusion (ταραχή) in his or her soul. Thus, those whose rational capacities are weak enough to be misled by the senses and cannot consider multiple points of view are convinced of their reliability.

Even though he later admits that only children and fools risk being permanently caught by this bewitchment, Plato’s words suggest that the essence of art lies in this attempt to deceive and undermine rational comprehension. This judgment clearly resembles Levinas’s: for both, art produces an obstacle to understanding and, even more drastically, its very nature lies in producing those obstacles.

The second criticism evoked by Levinas has to do with the effects of the escape into the hither side allowed by art. It revolves around the implications of detaching from the real world towards artistic illusions. According to Levinas, the so-called “exoticism” of art guarantees a profoundly irresponsible (*dégagée*) and hopelessly amoral existence, both for the artist and for those who benefit from art: “There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in the artistic enjoyment” (“Reality and its Shadow” 12). In this case, this judgment has a deep connection with the Platonic condemnation: in the aforementioned Tenth Book, while underlining the inaccuracy of art and artists’ lack of skills and knowledge, Plato writes that μίμησις must be qualified as “a form of play, not to be taken seriously” (Plat., *Resp.* 10. 602b).

In this case, the two authors’ stresses and tones slightly differ, but they reach a similar conclusion. For Plato, it is up to the inhabitants of the *Kallipolis* to recognize the unreliability of art and relegate it to a dimension of *divertissement* (Plat., *Resp.* 10. 607b), banning it from the city. Meanwhile, for Levinas, art autonomously and voluntarily exiles itself from the social context (“Reality and its Shadow” 12).

In this discussion, Levinas’s target is artistic enchantment, which is ultimately responsible for the artists’ and audience’s abandonment of the real world. This “exotic disengagement” is described through images taken from the musical field. It is not associated with a proper sound element (which often has a positive value in Levinas) but with the rhythmic component of the

melody. The “possessed and inspired” (“Reality and its Shadow” 2–3) artist is transported into a dimension where he or she loses his or her initiative and individuality while passively following the tempo of artistic inspiration. These themes and images—which will later be positively re-evaluated, namely in *Otherwise than Being*—are used here to suggest that, in artistic creativity and aesthetic enjoyment, the subject loses his capacity for initiative and dissolves into impersonal and irresponsible anonymity. This condition is very similar to the neutrality of the *il y a*: “in the rhythm there is no longer a one self, but rather a sort of passage from one self to anonymity” (“Reality and its Shadow” 2–3).

Such rhythmicity capable of cancelling the ego of the artist and of those who participate in aesthetic ecstasy runs through art in all its forms and multiple languages. Through its infinite rhythmic repetition, any work of art generates an illusory impression of movement, which hides an intrinsic fixity and imprisons the artistic product in the “meanwhile” (*entretemps*) (“Reality and its Shadow” 8): “eternally Laocoön will be caught in the grip of serpents” and “eternally the Mona Lisa will smile” (“Reality and its Shadow” 9). The temporality of the work of art is so fallacious and grotesque because it consists precisely of this forced and unnatural arrest onto the instant.

This fixity regards all forms of art, meaning it also involves literature. Even in the most vivid novels, characters remain “imprisoned” within a fictitious existence, in the infinite repetition of themselves. That is why, according to Levinas, despite its non-figurative nature, not even literature is capable of “shaking the fixity of images.” Every work of art is, in fact, “plastic” and ultimately very similar to sculptures (“Reality and its Shadow” 8).

This leads to another surprising consequence: because of their paralysis, literary characters are silenced, just like a statue (“Reality and its Shadow” 10). This reference to silence also occurs in the opening lines of the essay, in which Levinas underlines that the apparent completeness of a work of art makes it mute and incapable of engaging in a true dialogue. Later in the text, he describes art in an even more explicit way as that force that fills the world with idols that “have mouths but do not speak” (“Reality and its Shadow” 12). The point is now quite clear: the fixity that Levinas highlights seems to establish a profound correlation with silence. Every work of art—even, paradoxically, those that are entirely made up of words or sounds—has a completeness that makes it inexorably silent.

These observations allow us to consider another text published by Levinas only one year later: “Transcending Words.” Here, the author discusses the problem of silence in art in an analogous way: “The arts, even those based on sound, make silence” (“Transcending Words” 145). Art and aestheticization have a certain tendency towards saturation, calm, and pacification, aiming to appease any irruption of the authentic sound phenomenon, which, according to Levinas, is exclusively linguistic: “The sound and rumour of nature are deceptive words. To truly hear a sound is to hear a vocable. Pure sound is the Word” (“Transcending Words” 148). On several occasions and with an increasingly decisive tone, Levinas establishes a sort of unavoidable “either-or” between art and the speaking word. Where art asserts itself undisturbed, words fade.

In discussing this point, “Transcending Words” offers an argumentation that was absent in the previous essay. Through brief observations, Levinas proposes a parallel between art and writing precisely in this respect. Like art, writing crystallizes and devitalizes words, which are fully lively only in orality. Written speech comprises “disfigured words, frozen words [*paroles gelées*] where language is already turned into documents and vestiges.” Works of art and writing share the inability to engage in a dialogue and fall equally into silence. The author suggests a similar consonance between the immobilism of a work of art in another passage, where he underlines the privilege of the living word over writing, which is an “image-word or an already picturesque sign” (“Transcending Words” 149).

The last profound correspondence between Levinas's thesis and Plato is precisely identified in this connection between art, silence, and writing. As known, in a *locus classicus* of the *Phaedrus*, Plato, too, significantly compares written speech to painting (Plat, *Phdr.* 275d). Just like in Levinas, moreover, this comparison revolves around the fact that neither art nor writing lend themselves to a proper dialogue. As Socrates points out, "Writing... has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence."

This link was finally made explicit by Levinas in the conference *L'écrit et l'oral* (*The Written and the Oral*), which was given in 1952 at the Collège Philosophique in Paris. After describing the relationship between the reader and the written word, Levinas comments:

A painting is a whole world with its centre outside us. That is why, in order to describe the disappointment provoked by dialogues with written speeches, Plato compares writing to painting, which seems to be able to respond, but does not.... The work of art is distant, it does not have a face. Not only does it not respond, it does not raise questions, either" (*Parole et Silence* 209).

These words display the connection between the two criticisms that Levinas had addressed to art and writing from 1948–49. Neither one of them answers, i.e., escapes the responsive dimension of language that constitutes the essential horizon for an asymmetrical relationship with the Other and its call for responsibility. Ultimately, art and writing are irresponsible and, therefore, irresponsible to the extent that, as Feron points out, the ethical response "is at the same time responding of and responding to" (83).

2. Beyond Plato

Despite starting with this significant harmony, Levinas and Plato take two remarkably different paths, as will be shown. This becomes evident in Levinas's analysis of the value of writing in the aforementioned *L'écrit et l'oral*, where, despite using the words of the *Phaedrus* on several occasions, he reaches decidedly anti-Platonic conclusions without even problematizing them.³ In other texts, however, this anti-Platonic line of argument becomes explicit and is acknowledged by the author, who, while appreciating some cues of Platonic philosophy, seems to consider them as near-sighted. If correctly evaluated, Levinas's analyses criticize Platonism and, along with it, the original traits through which it influenced the development of Western thought *tout-court*.

The first hints of this gap can be found in "Reality and its Shadow." Although, to quote Calin, in this essay Levinas is still "a Platonist, that is, a thinker of light" (389), he does not hesitate to underline that the Platonic criticism of art is incomplete and deficient. Even though the products of art may appear caricatural and grotesque, their proliferation and the hypervalorization of aesthetics in contemporary philosophy do not depend on art itself but, more subtly, on the interpretation that the West has always assigned to the reality that art represents. Let us read Levinas:

A being is that which is, that which reveals itself in its truth, and, at the same time, it resembles itself, its own image.... The idea of shadow or reflection to which we have appealed—of an essential doubling of reality by its image, of an ambiguity "on the hither side"—extends to the light itself, to thought, to inner life.... In art, allegory is introduced into the world, as truth is accomplished in cognition. These are two contemporary possibilities of Being. Alongside the simultaneity of the idea and the soul—that is, of Being and disclosure ... there is a simultaneity of Being and its reflection.... The discussion over the primacy of art or nature—does art imitate nature or does natural beauty imitate art—fails to recognize the simultaneity of truth and its image. The notion of shadow enables us to situate the economy of resemblance within the general economy of Being ("Reality and its Shadow" 6–7).

These few lines portray a purely Levinasian argumentation which may find a significant critical objective in Platonic thought. The heart of the matter is no longer represented by art as such but by its object or, in other words, by that which art counterfeits or obfuscates. In this context, the philosopher does not simply speak of reality but introduces two categories—Being and being—which, in Levinas's vocabulary, belong eminently to Western thought. Their usage clearly has consequences on a theoretical level: Being and its image, as well as each being and its reflection, are given simultaneously. Being and its image have such a strong relationship of absolute inseparability and complete contextuality that art seems a necessary and unavoidable consequence of the very giving of Being.

This type of bond, Levinas suggests, is due to the sheer nature of Being as shaped and theorized by Western thought (which, needless to say, is also what art is bound to represent). Images of Being are possible and inevitable because Western thought has always understood them in visual terms. Plato famously describes the ontological principles of realities as εἶδη (literally "that which is seen", "shape"). Furthermore, in the *Phaedrus*, the soul's return to the metaphysical world happen by recollecting earthly glimpses of ideal beauty, described as that which is "the most clearly seen" (ἐκφανέστατον, Plat., *Phdr.* 250d). If Being is a matter of form, it will inevitably produce a shadow; if Being is a matter light, it will inevitably produce a reflection. This first and fundamental operation—interpreting Being and its giving in an optical sense—authorizes art and allows it to become a privileged place to manifest Being. The Platonic critique of art, while being followed quite slavishly by Levinas, fails to effectively grasp the original breach through which art penetrates Western thought.

This conclusion is explicitly suggested in the 1952 conference, during which Levinas argues that, in Western terms, "the world organizes itself according to a visual perspective—it remains plastic." Very significantly, he then immediately adds that "Every art is plastic. Should we remember the prestige of art in contemporary civilization? The optical interpretation of truth since Plato?" (*Paroles et Silence* 210). These words are fundamental to clarify Levinas's perspective: despite assuming such distant positions in judging the role of art, in Levinas's view, Plato and Heidegger fit into a line of continuity, as both depended on the emphasis attributed by the West to this visual element. Truth is visual and, *for this very reason*, produces a reflection or a shadow.

This remark has another decisive consequence. As Levinas mentions in the passage quoted above, this interpretation announces the entry of the "logic of resemblance" ("Reality and its Shadow" 7) in the general economy of Being. In Jacques Collénoy's words, "Reality (the sum of beings), as long as it presents its face, is always *its* double, *its* shadow, *its* image" (86). This scheme introduces "copies and specimens" of what is unique, delivering the individual "to the generality and extension of a genre" ("The Prohibition Against Representation" 123). In other words, the visibility of Being favours the emergence of a tendency towards systematization, harmonization, and order.

The same observation is more explicitly brought up in "Transcending Words", in which Levinas comments:

However, doesn't the spatial quality in the play of word-erasing come from its visual aspect?... Yet, again, isn't it true that the particular brand of symbolism imbedded in the aesthetic essence of reality owes its explanation to the very nature of visual experience under which Western civilization eventually subsumes any kind of spiritual life? The aesthetic essence deals with ideas, it is luminescent, it seeks clarity and evidence. It ends up in the unveiled world of phenomena. Everything is immanent to it. Seeing means being in a self-sufficient world that is completely here. Any vision reaching beyond the realm of given facts remains within that realm.... And the universality of art also rests on that primacy of vision. It produces beauty in nature, it calms and soothes it. ("Transcending Words" 148-149).

Another side of Levinas's argument is developed in the above passage. If the truth of being is expressed in terms of manifestation and unveiling, as ἀ-λήθεια, analogously, the activity of the subject who grasps it can only be understood as a corresponding gesture of clarification and *elucidation*. Again, this attitude leads to the notion of comprehension as an act of ordering and systematizing. For Levinas, vision and light become fundamental hermeneutical keys for interpreting Western thought in its entirety, from its beginnings to the most recent outcomes. These themes constitute a *fil rouge* that holds together Western philosophy, which represents a single great effort in the direction of clarity, evidence, and, ultimately, universality.

3. Recomposing the West: Husserl and Heidegger

In Levinas's reconstruction of Eurocentric thought, light metaphors become particularly appreciable in the broad and articulated treatment that Levinas gives of Husserl and Heidegger. Husserl was a fundamental key figure in the years that Levinas spent in Freiburg. Nevertheless, Levinas recognized a sort of imperialism of light and vision in Husserl's phenomenology. For example, the correspondence between the activity of the intentional act of the subject and the intended object is described as that movement whereby "every object calls forth and as it gives rise to the consciousness through which its being shines and, in doing so, appears" (*Discovering existence with Husserl* 119).

Here, the criticism towards the predominance of the visual element in Husserl intertwines with the fundamental adage of Levinasian philosophy related to the process of assimilation by the Same towards the Other: "Light is that through which something is other than myself, but already as if it came from me. The illuminated object is something one encounters, but from the very fact that it is illuminated, one encounters it as if it came from us" ("The Time and the Other" 64).

In Husserl's intentionality, Levinas registers a tension towards evidence that implies a progressive clarification of the intentional contents by the subject through a gradual process of identification in which he assimilates them to himself, understanding and depriving them of their radical otherness. The striving for clarity, harmonization, and systematization that Levinas recognizes above all in the Husserlian *Sinngebung* is described again in optical terms.

As mentioned, Levinas traces the core of Heidegger's thought to an analogous "play of light" (*Totality and Infinity* 27). In *The Trace of the Other*, Levinas paraphrases Heidegger's theses as follows: "The Being of beings—difference itself, and consequently alterity—enlightens, according to Heidegger, inasmuch that it is buried and always forgotten.... For it is still in term of light and obscurity... that Being is approached.... Western philosophy coincides with the disclosure of the Other where the Other, manifesting itself as a being, loses its alterity" (*The Trace of the Other* 346).

In this context, the visual metaphors are also traced to the process of assimilation of the Same towards the Other. In Levinasian terms, losing one's otherness means inserting the Other within a horizon that is always complete, harmonious, and ordered, as guaranteed by appearance and visibility themselves. Vision namely produces a "call to order" ("Phenomenon and Enigma" 63) which makes any otherness fade away in its very manifesting. As soon as it enters vision, everything is invariably returned to the present and harmonized with the other elements that comprise the field within which it is summoned.

It is now possible to more widely contextualize the deep link between this systematizing tension of Being and truth understood in optical terms and the soothing faculty Levinas attributes to art in the 1949 essay. The silence for which Levinas reproached plastic figures and statues does not constitute a distortion provoked by art alone, as Plato thought. Instead, it represents a caricatured and grotesque version of a tendency already expressed at the root, in the modality through which Western thought structures its own ontological categories. As Levinas states years later in *Otherwise than Being*, "The movement beyond Being becomes ontology."

Moreover, he adds that this same root also produces “the idolatry of beautiful” (*Otherwise than Being* 199), making explicit the connection between a certain ontological conception and the much-reviled hypertrophy of art.

Despite some philological simplifications, Levinas identifies and lets emerge a general tendency of the West, which is rarely so openly addressed: the typically Greek obsession for beauty,⁴ form, and shape, the urge to trace every spiritual act to a plastic and istic dimension in a sort of constant need for aestheticization.

The point of the last part of this essay is that Levinas may have detected these common threads precisely because he had the possibility of observing the path of Western philosophy from the outside. Thus, he could take advantage of the different and completely de-centred point of view of his Jewish heritage. In this regard, in “Reality and its Shadow”, Levinas seems to oppose a Jewish principle to Greekness, recognizing that “the proscription of images is truly the supreme commandment of monotheism” (“Reality and its Shadow” 11).

As Cohen underlines, it is very naïve to reduce Levinas’s critique of art to a sort of blind obedience to Judaism, as some do (52). Nevertheless, *contra* Welten (60, 62), this bond to his Jewish heritage must not be belittled. Rather, the philosopher’s religious beliefs must be understood as a hermeneutical key that helps him to consider Western assumptions in a more radical and detached way. A curious outcome in the dynamics between the Other and the Same occurs here. The Other—the Jewish—will prove a fundamental hermeneutical key for deconstructing and understanding a kind of thought—the Greek-Western one—that has always put self-comprehension and self-clarification at the core of its interests.

4. Jewish Aniconism and the Second Commandment

Despite alluding to this confrontation in “Reality and its Shadow”, the philosopher does not delve into the relationship between the negative evaluation of art expressed in the essay and the aniconism imposed by the Jewish Bible. Nevertheless, this question is addressed directly in an essay published years later, entitled “The Prohibition against Representation and the Rights of Man.” The essay opens with a declaration of intent, in which Levinas states that, although he does not want to launch himself into a historical and philological reconstruction of the biblical prohibition, “we should not allow that expression to circulate glibly and out of context, like an aphorism, without having previously examined closely what the Bible says about it, and, in its multidimensional language, the Law of the Talmud” (“The Prohibition against Representation and the Rights of Man” 121).

The formula to which Levinas refers is part of the so-called “second commandment.” It constitutes the second prescription which is announced to the people by Moses, who has just received the tables of the Law in the book of *Exodus*. In the relevant verses, we read:

You shall not make for yourself a carved image (*pesel*) nor any manner of likeness (*temunah*) of anything that is in heaven above, that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth (*Ex.* 20.4).

Some considerations should be pointed out here. The divine prohibition is expressed through the terms *pesel* and *temunah*. The first derives from a **p-s-l* root (from which the verb *pissel*, “to hew”, also comes from) and refers to plastic and sculpted images. The second, *temunah*, has to do with the act of shaping and configuration and is usually translated as “image” or “representation.” As Scholem recalls, this same term is used in a passage from *Deuteronomy* evoking the episode of the revelation on Sinai, in which Moses’ inability to directly see God is reiterated. In spite of what happens on that occurrence, this term does not refer here to the representation of divinity but aims to banish representation of any kind, from that of creatures inhabiting the sea to those that live in the sky. The meaning of this indication is further specified in the following verse:

You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous (*qanna*) God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation (Ex. 20.5).

This prohibition is associated with a *Leitmotiv* that will become topical in Jewish spiritual tradition, that of the so-called jealousy of God. Here, God himself proclaims himself as *qanna* ("jealous") of his own people in the name of the pact (*berit*) he made with them. The purpose of this prohibition, therefore, is to ensure that the people of Israel remain faithful to their one God and do not let themselves be fascinated by the polytheistic and idolatrous orientation of the populations that surround them, allowing new deities made up of gold and stone to mine their monotheism.

This perspective clarifies why this prohibition refers particularly to statues and plastic images, which were often used by pagan populations as objects of worship. That is also why the title of the Talmudic treatise that deals the most with the problem of idolatry, namely, the *Avoda Zarah*, has nothing to do with images but means "foreign cult." However, this original need for the people of Israel to maintain their identity and differentiate themselves from neighbouring polytheistic populations soon turned into a general aversion to any representation, leading to the total interdiction of images.

The reference to these motifs and texts is to be found, as mentioned, only in Levinas's pre-erition. However, when he approaches the heart of his philosophical thesis, he cannot but once again quote a text taken from the religious tradition, which the author had already silently mentioned in "Reality and its Shadow." While discussing the nature of representations and works of art, he says that, in the plasticity of their pure appearance, they end up being "the caricature of 'mouth that do not speak', 'eyes that do not see', 'ears that do not hear', and 'noses that do not smell'" explicitly referring to "Psalm 115" ("The Prohibition against Representation and the Rights of Man" 123), in which it is analogously stated that foreigner idols "have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not; they have ears, but they hear not; noses have they, but they smell not" (Psalm 115-5-6).

Levinas stops here and does not quote the verses that immediately follow, in which it is added that "those who make them [idols] will become like them." In a way, through this observation, the Psalm unmasks the propensity to produce artistic objects as a mere symptom of a more totalizing and radical attitude, which can run through an entire tradition and determine its thinking. One cannot but notice that, unsurprisingly, Levinas develops his thesis by continuing and expanding this very line of argument:

As for me, I would like to enquire whether, beneath the mistrust of images of beings recommended by Jewish monotheism, there is not a denunciation, in the structures of signifying and the meaningful, of a certain favoring of representation over other possible modes of thought. In representation—*cogitatio et cogitatum*—presence is created and recreated.... Cohesion and complicity of a seeing and a taking, but, in the re-presentation, the putting of that which is thought [*le pense*] at the disposal of, and *on the same scale as*, thinking: a deep-seated immanence or atheism in sight and knowledge, or the temptation of idolatry! ("The Prohibition against Representation and the Rights of Man" 122).

These few lines summarize the core of Levinas's interpretation of Jewish aniconism. Images and representations are not prohibited simply to maintain an exclusive connection with the unique god. Rather, this prohibition also hints at a possible way of thinking that resists the urge of presence and, correlatively, the need for conceptual grasp. Jewish aniconism paves the way to a thinking that does not need thematization. In the second commandment, Judaism expresses an invitation to approach the Other without any intention to fully understand,⁵ dominate, and objectify it. In this regard, Abraham's religion can be seen as a genuine alternative to the Western way of thinking, which cannot give up (or even admit) this intention.

5. Conclusions: The Irrepresentability of the Face and the Redemption of Art

The anathema against art is then discussed by Levinas with particular reference to the notion of Face. Since it constitutes the Other *par excellence*, the Face must escape the risk of representation in the strongest possible terms. This led to Levinas's words about its representability, which is firmly rejected:

This transcendence is alive in the relation to the Other man, i.e., in the proximity of one's fellow man, whose uniqueness and consequently whose irreducible alterity would be—still or already—unrecognized in the perception that stares at [*dé-visage*] the Other. Beneath the plasticity of the face [figure] that *appears*, the face [*visage*] is already missed. It is frozen in art itself, despite the artist's attempt to disfigure that 'something' that starts again, *figurative*, in presence ("The Prohibition against Representation and the Rights of Man" 126)

These judgments are reiterated throughout the philosopher's work. In *Totality and Infinity*, for example, he states that the Face is a manifestation constantly unmaking the very form under which it appears (*Totality and Infinity* 66) or "a 'vision' without images" (*Totality and Infinity* 23). As Philippe Crignon puts it, "not being a phenomenon, the face is strictly invisible, and *thus* unfigurable" (103, my emphasis). In similar terms, the complete opposition between the notion of *visage* and art had already been illustrated in "Ethics and Spirits", where Levinas made the point that art fails to put a face to things and ends up producing nothing but mere caricatures ("Ethics and Spirit" 8).

Nonetheless, in the same essay, he surprisingly recognizes that the "greatness and deceit of art reside" in such a failed attempt ("Ethics and Spirit" 8). Here, as Françoise Armengaud suggests ("Faire ou ne pas faire d'images" 2) Levinas may hint at a way for art to ambiguously redeem⁶ itself. Namely, he mentions the potential revelatory value of an art form that aims to disfigure the domain of the figurative and disfigure itself. Yet it fails in doing so, falling back into that very domain: this failure is able—in Levinas's view—to show art incapacity and insufficiency. By failing to negate its figurative elements, art may be able to show its inadequacy to express a truly metaphysical dimension.

This remark appears to be of the utmost importance if we relate it to the interview on Sacha Sosno that Levinas released a few years later (*On Obliteration. An Interview with Françoise Armengaud Concerning the Work of Sacha Sosno*). This artist's work was centred on the attempt to disfigure things or—to quote the title of the volume in which the interview is collected—to "obliterate them." Of significance, this artist's work seems to provide fertile ground for Levinas's reflections on obliteration, which, as readers will recall, already represented the question at the core of "Transcending Words."⁷

Ultimately, we might conclude that the redemption of art, in Levinas's terms, is to be found in attempts of this kind. Art shall no longer try to put a face to things but should instead represent the very impossibility of this effort. In this perspective, the "art of obliteration" should not produce "images without images", as Paul Bernard-Nourad puts it (105–106), but *represent* the lack of metaphysical resources of *any representational* product. In other words, we shall entrust it with the charge of denouncing its incapacity to restore the Other in his/her transcendence. From this perspective, art (at least in a strictly figurative sense) may survive in pointing to a dimension beyond aesthetics, as Armengaud points out ("Etica ed estetica" 106–7), and, thus, beyond Being. That would ultimately be a form of art that takes up Jewish aniconism and puts it into question. To put it paradoxically, art can redeem itself by repeating the gesture of Abraham destroying idols,⁸ that is, by staging its own collapse.

Notes

- ¹ Rosen particularly refers to Jill Robbins (*Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*) and Robert Eaglestone (*Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas*).
- ² This term comprises the noun σκιά (“shadow”) and γραφή (“writing”). It occurs ten times in Plato and refers to a peculiar form of perspective painting with illusionistic characteristics that were probably used in theatrical scenographies. According to Eva Keuls, it was “an impressionistic technique, using divisions of bright colors and relying on the phenomenon of optical color fusion” (1). It probably developed between the fifth and fourth century B.C.
- ³ Levinas widely refers to the *Phaedrus* in *L'écrit et l'oral* to express his preference for oral speech over writing. Throughout his work, he uses the expression “speech that can assist itself” (e.g. *Totality and Infinity* 71) several times with reference to the description of oral speech in *Phdr.* 275e. This expression is also mentioned by Derrida in his essay “Violence and Metaphysics”, where he says that the Levinasian Face “does not present itself as a sign, but expresses itself”, which implies “to be able of attending to one’s speech” (*Writing and Difference* 126). Derrida’s general critique of Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* lies behind these words: how could Levinas aspire to successfully criticize Western philosophy while using its own language, first and foremost, by adhering to its *phonocentrism*? A partial answer to this question could be given based on Levinas’s remarks on the *Phaedrus*. According to Levinas’s, the *Phaedrus* supports the oral speech because it can be reformulated and freed from the author’s *vouloir-dire*. This conclusion is derived from a patent misinterpretation of Plato’s text but paradoxically approaches Levinas’s ideas on language to Derrida’s. For a more general overview of this debate see “The contaminated Wound: Derrida on the language of Levinas”, by Gert-Jan van der Heiden. As known, the debate between Derrida and Levinas will continue even after Levinas’s death. On the occasion of his friend’s funeral, Derrida will compose the notorious *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, whose contents and implications are subtly discussed by François Raffoul (211–222).
- ⁴ This connection is specifically brought up in one of Levinas’s Talmudic Lessons dealing with the translation of the Bible into Greek. In that context, the Greek language is marked by harmony and beauty (*In the Time of Nations* 52–52).
- ⁵ A similar opinion is expressed by Ruud Welten, who states that “The prohibition of images represents an awareness of this incomprehensibility” (71), with reference to the figure of the Other. In particular, the author reads Levinas’s discussion on Jewish aniconism in the light of the notion of obliviousness.
- ⁶ In a footnote, Françoise Armengaud recalls Levinas’s comment on her lexical choice: “Vous dites de le ‘rédimier’, comme s’il était un péché!” (“Faire ou ne pas faire d’images” 11).
- ⁷ The title of the Leiris’s autobiography *Biffures*, to which “Transcending words” was dedicated, literally means “erasures.”
- ⁸ According to *Apocalypse of Abraham*, a first-century A.D. text, the patriarch Abraham was the son of a seller of idols. Profiting from the absence of his father, he secretly broke all but the largest one in order to blame it for their destruction (“A Religion for Adults” 14).

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The Paradox of Teaching Fiction in French Educational Contexts

JEAN-FRANÇOIS VERNAY

Introduction

Non-professional fiction readers largely follow the so-called “impulses of the heart” when it comes to selecting a book, being immersed in its reading, and judging its content. Professional readers — whom I shall define later — seem to act differently, or at least to overlook the importance of the seduction scene between readers and fiction, especially in educational contexts. Even if the scientific approach to the humanities partakes of a need to objectify the assessment criteria within the educational sector, turning critical practices into some form of science will surely not help reinstate the place and value of emotions in relation to reading.

My article will explore the various forms of attachment and emotions that come into play when choosing, purchasing, reading and interpreting fiction by contrasting the different responses from non-professional and professional readers. Ultimately, my argumentation will reveal the strange paradox which affects literature in educational context.

1. The Book as an Object of Appeal: Aesthetics and Emotional Attachment

If we are to discuss books as objects of appeal, it is crucial to make a distinction between the professional reader, namely anyone *under an obligation to read*, and the nonprofessional reader.¹ For professional readers, reading is more driven by necessity than by desire and so the appeal of books will be of little or of less importance. This is why my discussion of the significance of the aesthetic appeal in selecting a book will be contained to the nonprofessional reader.

Drawing a parallel between consumerism and interpersonal relationships to define the rules of attraction, Erich Fromm cunningly observes that “Our whole culture is based on the appetite for buying, on the idea of a mutually favourable exchange. Modern man’s happiness consists in the thrill of looking at the shop windows, and in buying all that he can afford to buy either for cash or on instalments. He (or she) looks at people in a similar way.”² To be coveted as rewarding prizes, objects must be desirable and offer good value in return. Therefore, if books are not cognitively engaging, they are at least expected to be aesthetically attractive. In our digital age, there is precious little discussion about the sensuality of the book as object — the allure of the cover, the touch and smell of the pages, the whisper of the words — pleasures that electronic reading devices will soon obscure if not entirely oust. There is little doubt that the physical book with its full identity (ISBN, aesthetics, size, shape, texture and odour) remains an object crafted to trigger emotion-induced desire.

Most contemporary publishing houses in the English-speaking world³ which are serious about sales tend to signpost the aesthetic appeal of books with eye-catching idiosyncratic cover designs meant for scopic pleasure, luring readers into taking an interest in the contents of the books. I say “idiosyncratic” because a same book produced in several editions is very likely to be re-jacketed from one publisher to the next, according to their personal sense of aesthetics. With this marketing-oriented strategy, book designers play on various incentive-generating emo-

tions related to object properties such as interest, curiosity and attraction. These desire-driven emotions build up anticipatory pleasure, namely “the experience of pleasure related to future activities”.⁴ What most publishers are essentially trying to avoid is producing books that would elicit aversion, disgust, and indifference — emotions which would be perceived as essentially negative in this particular context.

Nowadays, paperbacks and soft-cover novels are advantaged by luxury packaging quite unlike, say, the sobriety of books in Australia during the 1970s with their fragile binding, monochrome covers and poor quality paper. In this new marketing strategy where being engrossing is just not good enough a quality for narratives to sell successfully, praise for the book on the dust jacket might convince readers that it is worthwhile the attention and the effort of reading while publicity photos on the back cover or on the spine of the book are likely to familiarize readers with authors. More often than not, the front cover purports to be artistically attractive⁵ and the well-spaced text that comes in a generous reader-friendly font is meant to enhance the pleasantness of reading. Far be it from me to argue that storytelling is less important than its aesthetic presentation because form and content are equally decisive factors when it comes to assessing the book as an object of appeal.

Another phenomenon beyond the aesthetic appeal of fiction which would account for the fact that books are unambiguously objects of attraction is man’s seemingly natural emotional attachment to objects. For Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986), “[...] a book is more than a verbal structure, or a series of verbal structures; a book is the dialogue with the reader, and the peculiar accent he gives to its voice, and the changing and durable images it leaves in his memory. That dialogue is infinite.”⁶ It is noteworthy that there is no talk of the book as a conversation between reader and writer as you would half-expect, but rather an exchange between reader and book as an object, which is reminiscent of Serge Tisseron’s observation that human beings have a tendency to anthropomorphise objects.⁷

This French psychiatrist also reminds readers that emotional attachment to objects starts at four years of age with the “transitional object”⁸ identified in early childhood development by British psychiatrist Donald Winnicott. This prothetic attachment peaks in adolescence with ‘mirror objects’ allowing teenagers to construct an identity of their own choosing, distinct from the one imposed by their parents or society. Later in adulthood, it finally morphs into a new level of fetishistic attachment, when adults start accumulating objects for various reasons. People might want to assert their social status, to connect with social groups, to use them as repositories of memories or as testimonies to key moments in their personal lives, or they might simply want to feel a sense of continuity. According to Tisseron, objects tend to fulfil four basic functions, namely servitude, testimony, complicity and partnership.⁹

Needless to say that fiction books are more likely than not to create a collusive relationship, a rapport of complicity with readers especially by allowing them to identify or empathize with intradiegetic (i.e. any character or the narrator if they are not conflated as one entity) or extradiegetic characters (most likely to be the narrator with his familiar voice). This collusive relationship with books might account for the fact that, in the face of a decluttering experience, it is extremely difficult to break the sentimental attachment to books and heart-wrenching to let go of them. All the more so if the books contain an inscription by the author (thus sporting fetishistic value) or if they have been received as special gifts. Eventually, emotional attachment to books enhanced by readers’ emotional involvement with characters is likely to morph into sentimental fondness for authors, as Catherine Belsey notes:

People develop close personal relationships with their favourite authors. We respond emotionally to the insight, the sensitivity, the lyric gift displayed in their work, and in no time at all it seems as if we have a special intimacy with these exceptional beings. Thus elevated, they become objects of desire; their elusiveness, or the mysterious origin of their skill, only enhances their power to seduce; interpretation surrenders to romance.¹⁰

Emotional attachment, when not stimulated by the multifaceted appeal of a novel or by a col-lusive rapport with characters and/ or author, is also nourished by the cognitive appeal that underlies the reading process.

2. Reading with Feeling¹¹: Cognitive Appeal and Pleasure

When in the shoes of a nonprofessional reader, I usually follow my heart when it comes to choosing my reads. To pause and consider this may seem commonplace, but this amorous encounter with the book is of the utmost importance if we are to discuss further the attractability of books, as I am more and more convinced that the relationship of individuals to literature is what steers the scene of seduction between writer and reader. In order to seduce readers, writers must entertain them to secure their attention. This is one of the basic equations of literature which, in my eyes, allows the reader to give credence to the story.

For attention to be sustained beyond the standard ten-minute span, writers are required to find ways to arouse interest in readers. Not only creative writers are professionals at seduction who use and abuse the imaginary to secure the reader's belief in the story, but emotionally charged situations in fiction are also designed to get the attention of readers and keep them immersed in the stories by isolating them sensorily from their environment. As Adam Philips has it, "The care is taken to keep the reader entertained, to hold her attention; the writer is up against the reader's distractedness, her failing concentration. The wish always to be somewhere else, at least in one's mind. The get-out clause in any act of reading"¹².

Although a recent trend in studies of fiction tend to amalgamate ruminations on novels, TV series, movies, and even video games around the concept of storytelling, it must be noted that literary narratives are not in the business of offering scopic pleasure as visual arts would, but rather *cognitive pleasure*, which finds its source in the satisfaction knowledge provides. I am inclined to believe that the seductive pleasure is not solely derived from the dual aesthetics of the literary text, namely the visual aesthetic related to the descriptive imagery, and the auditory aesthetic that we perceive through the melody of words. Given that seduction also operates on a mental level, it is important to enhance the underlying connections to the text that stimulate a reader's capacity to draw parallels, and to glimpse the networks of ideas suggested by the text.

The desire to seduce readers is often consubstantial with a *mimetic desire* that responds to a concern to strive for realism, to show the world as it is, unvarnished and without ornament. But then how is it that science fiction stories, where imitation is less conspicuous, still manage to attract a wide readership? The answer may lie in the ability fiction has in encouraging the reader's brain to play two of its most natural roles: seeking psychic pleasure and filling in the blanks of perception. Readers' compulsion to make sense out of the lacunary is fulfilled when processing data and connecting the dots with their imagination. As Siri Hustvedt has it, "Meaning itself may be the ultimate human seduction."¹³ So there is no denying that fiction seduces readers and that the psychic pleasure derived from its cognitive appeal manifests itself in at least two different ways: *jouissance* and consummatory pleasure, which are obtained through aesthetic experience.¹⁴

In her essay on contemporary art titled *The Revenge of Emotions*, Catherine Grenier sees in French literary theorist Roland Barthes the harbinger of the affective turn in France which she makes it coincide with the publication of his *Camera Lucida* (1980).¹⁵ But seven years earlier Barthes published his seminal book on emotional hedonism, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), in which he makes the clear-cut distinction between texts from which readers would derive pleasure and those from which they would derive a form of *jouissance* (translated as bliss), therefore endorsing fiction's capacity to provide psychic pleasure.¹⁶ *Jouissance* is to be understood as the climactic moment in reading for pleasure when readers are caught in a state of loss, what we call immersion nowadays. This state is mainly obtained through "writerly texts" (*des textes*

scriptibles), texts with which readers break out of their passive reading and collaborate with the author for meaning. A concept which is not dissimilar to the theses of Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser propounded in their reader-response criticism as soon as the early 1960s.

But *jouissance* appears to be concomitant with “consummatory pleasure [which] refers to the ‘in the moment’ pleasure experienced by the subject directly engaged in an enjoyable activity”¹⁷. Such consummatory pleasure is the physiological result of “the release of endorphins, which are related to opiates and give a peaceful, euphoric bliss.”¹⁸ For French University Professor Alain Vaillant, it seems that consummatory pleasure, which he feels people often seem to mistake for aesthetic pleasure, takes place in the act of imagining, in the filling of these cognitive gaps while reading, while reconstructing the story in one’s mind. To him, literature

designates all discursive productions of which the principal object, for the author and/or the reader, is pleasure born from the exercise of the imagination. This pleasure arises from specific cognitive mechanisms that set imagination in motion through language: imagination exercises in a specific way human mental and emotional faculties, and the consciousness of this intellectual activity is accompanied, whether the mental images be painful or happy, by euphoric sensations—as one can experience in sporting activity, at the very moment when pain is endured through effort. What we are labelling with the misnomer of aesthetic pleasure, produced by literature, is therefore nothing other than the *jouissance* born from this application of the imagination to the words—whatever the object and the nature of the words.¹⁹

The “euphoric sensations” in question, which occur through consummatory pleasure, are the work “of a wizard brain, or a conjurer in us who decides at any moment what part of reality to use as the basis of our dreams, and to what extent our imagination must embellish reality, lighten it or fake it. This wizardry, second nature to us, has an adaptive role: giving minds the means to produce psychic pleasure” declares French psychiatrist Roland Jouvent in his 2009 book written from a Darwinian perspective.²⁰

Because creative writers are naturally attuned to their emotions as Daniel Goleman once observed,²¹ storytelling — which requires them to tap into the reservoir of emotions — can be likened to an alchemy process whereby “deeply emotional material [is transmogrified] into meaningful stories”.²² It is therefore fair to see fiction books as capsules of linguistically processed emotions, an aspect which deserves to be treated with more consideration in educational contexts.

3. Fiction in French Educational Context: Detachment versus Attachment

In an essay entitled “Literary Pleasure”, Jorge Luis Borges claims that, though he was “a hospitable reader” who had experienced “the greatest literary joys” in his early days, pleasure was much harder to find in reading once he became a critic:

[...] I must confess (not without remorse and conscious of my deficiency) that [...] new readings do not enthrall me. Now I tend to dispute their novelty, to translate them into schools, influences, composites. I suspect that if they were sincere, all the critics in the world (and even some in Buenos Aires) would say the same.²³

In other words, Borges is telling us how he has evolved from nonprofessional reader to professional reader and how literary pleasure has faded in the course of his change of status. The conclusion to draw is that reclaiming the right to venting emotions during the act of reading or interpreting fiction is a non-issue for nonprofessional readers. We shall therefore focus on professional readers and situations in which emotions would be suppressed or envisaged with suspicion.

In *Creativity*, Kevin Brophy highlights the analogy between poetic creation and free association which both require “the suspension of critical judgement”,²⁴ unlike critical practice whose discourse aims at expressing channelled thoughts and sharp cognition-based analyses to which the judgement — that some might deem uncreative — will be faithful. The necessity to draw

a line between literary theory and creative writing may account for the fact that reason has become the bedrock of scholarly theory and critical practice while emotion has met less with opposition in the field of literary creativity.

More generally, the reason/ emotion divide can chiefly be accounted for by our strongly ingrained tradition of dichotomies in Western culture which tends to assess objects and phenomena in terms of polar opposites. Although some researchers now start talking about “the cognitive-emotional brain” as just one entity, most people (scientific circles included) seem to perceive the mind as a split object. There would be an emotional brain constituted by a specific brain circuit which would be pitted against the rational mind. It is fair to say that the latter is generally most trusted when it comes to analysing and assessing material — literary fiction included.

Within French academia, emotional attachment is frowned upon chiefly because emotions are credited with a capacity for being corrosive and for clouding reason, for impacting on mental clarity, in short — for overpowering the rational left hemisphere. As Daniel Goleman puts it,

The extent to which emotional upsets can interfere with mental life is no news to teachers. Students who are anxious, angry, or depressed don't learn; people who are caught in these states do not take in information efficiently or deal with it well. [...] [P]owerful negative emotions twist attention toward their own preoccupations, interfering with the attempt to focus elsewhere. Indeed, one of the signs that feelings have veered over the line into the pathological is that they are so intrusive they overwhelm all other thought, continually sabotaging attempts to pay attention to whatever other task is at hand.²⁵

This distrust of emotions is all the more surprising as man responds emotionally to things *before* they even get cognitively assessed, conceptualized, or figured out.

Reason, which enables professional readers to reach some form of detachment, has all too often been equated with dispassion and disinterestedness, because dispassionate readers feel they can achieve a fair and balanced interpretation of a work of literature only if they successfully manage to elude the sway of suspicious feelings.²⁶ The academic stance is likely to seek an objectifying distance bereft of affects and of a rapport of complicity with the literary text: otherwise put, it is academic criticism told through a flat voice reflecting a flatlined electrocardiogram. And yet, literary texts are already subject to a set of various influences such as our cognitive baggage, our biases, our ossified critical practices, and perhaps our fixed mindset, all of which shape our subjectivity and do not meet as strong an opposition as emotions. The difference may lie in the fact that, unlike emotions, cognition, prejudices, critical practices, and mindsets — being acquired over time — are not uncontrollably instinctive, though they may have become automatic responses to literary assessment.

In French educational contexts, emotions are also dealt tentatively with because they are largely *terra incognita* at this stage given the scientific limitations of technology-based investigative techniques such as fMRI neuroimaging procedures. As a result, many emotion-related aspects remain pure speculation,²⁷ making it difficult to substantiate theories with solid evidence. Besides, the plurality of views among emotion researchers in the affective sciences makes cross-disciplinary discussions fraught with imprecision and ambiguity,²⁸ not to mention the conceptual muddle which distinguishes fake emotions and false emotions, from quasi emotions and real-life emotions, to which literary scholars gleefully add “aesthetic emotions” of which “literary emotions” are a subcategory, “literary emotions” being themselves subdivided between “fiction emotions” and “artifact emotions”²⁹. And when one wishes to discuss the hypernymic emotion of empathy,³⁰ the sheer variety of approaches by disciplines defining empathy through their very lens sometimes lead to aporia and paradoxes. For instance, psychoanalysis stresses the reciprocity and therefore intersubjectivity of empathy.³¹ But if we were to transpose this definition to literary matters, how is intersubjectivity possible between reader and character? Not to mention the fact that scholarly emotion-focussed research in literary criticism is yet to reach

full maturity, despite the dynamic research undertaken by scholars in cognitive literary studies and affect studies.³²

Understanding how the literary text operates does not mean reconstructing its main elements with factual accuracy. Generations of teachers demanded of their students this limiting performance, an exercise that was mainly a response to a fantasy — that of seeing literary analysis elevated to a science. Formerly, as Tzvetan Todorov pointed out, literary history was confined to “a study of the causes that lead to the publication of the work: social forces, political, ethnic, psychological, of which the literary text was supposed to be the result.” This student exercise was also meant to analyze the “effects of this text, its distribution, its impact on the public, and its influence on other writers. The insertion of the literary work into a causal chain was thus given preference.”³³ These were the beginnings of a scientific process that saw a text as causing certain effects to be analyzed, or inversely as an effect for which one had to find the cause. Parallel to these investigations, for decades French literary theorists tried to outperform scientists with their Cartesian way of approaching literature through theorizing schemas (the hobby horse of Russian Formalists such as Vladimir Propp and Tzvetan Todorov); through the release of conceptual structures (see for example narratology, invented by structuralism, led by figures such as Roland Barthes, A. J. Greimas, and Gérard Genette), and prioritizing analytical approaches based to a certain extent on scientific principles.³⁴ Exactly what these theorists sought to do was neither more nor less than to objectify interpretation. However, as D.H. Lawrence wisely puts it, “Criticism can never be a science: it is, in the first place, much too personal, and in the second, it is concerned with values which science ignores. The touchstone is emotion, not reason ...”³⁵

Conclusion

Even if the scientific approach to the humanities partakes of a need to objectify the assessment criteria within the French educational sector, turning critical practice into some form of science will surely result in an asymptotic enterprise in which professional readers will systematically miss the goal, no matter how close they manage to get. And close enough will never be good enough. Clearly, the objectives of science and those of the humanities are as contrasted as those of the brain's left and right hemispheres: While the left hemisphere, like science, aims at thinking about our world as analytically and objectively as can be, the right — very much like the arts — favors a synthetic perspective based on intuition and emotions. The challenge is therefore to solve the paradox which aims at acknowledging and reinstating the subjectivity of reading practices by taking into account the plasticity of interpretation and its emotional aspects within secondary and tertiary education, systems that for the most part still require objective analyses. The paradox could therefore be formulated in the following terms: How can an object charged with affect like a book, which creates several forms of attachment through its aesthetic, cognitive and emotional appeal be dealt with unflinching detachment?

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Notes

- ¹ The professional reader is not a reader who makes a job out of reading books, but a reader on a mission, with a set purpose. He cannot but read a book for a particular project: a summary for a class presentation, a discussion for a book review, an in-depth analysis for a PhD, you name it. Reading for pleasure is often associated with no officially set purpose, which also means that non professional readers can drop the book if the reading is becoming tedious or boring, which will bear no consequence as there is no set task at stake. Among professional readers, you will find festival artistic directors, journalists, book-sellers, librarians, literary critics, editors, proofreaders, teachers; or students required to study a work. See the opening chapter of J.-F. Vernay, *The Seduction of Fiction*. Trans. C. Lee (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- ² E. Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (London: Thorsons, 1995), 2.
- ³ I need to specify that the scope of my analysis does not take into account the top French publishing houses, which seems to resist the marketing appeal of packaging novels with alluring front covers, though they are gradually warming up to this trend. Gallimard, Grasset, Seuil, and P.O.L, still produce in their selected series minimalistic monochrome covers with nothing more on them than the publisher's and author's names and the title. Jackets and covers are meant to encapsulate the essence of the book, and in this instance the focus seems to be on the words per se and not on their imaginative interpretations.
- ⁴ G. Loas, A. Verrier and J.-L. Monestes. "Relationship between Anticipatory, Consummatory Anhedonia and Disorganization in Schizotypy." *BMC Psychiatry* 14 (2014). PMC. Web 1 May 2016. URL: <http://bmcp psychiatry.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12888-014-0211-1> accessed on 01/05/2016.
- ⁵ The protagonist Liesel Meminger in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* gives an accurate rendition of the haptic and scopic pleasures derived from books. For a full discussion, see J.-F. Vernay, "Bibliophilia, Bibliomania or Bibliokleptomania? Liesel's Passionate Love Affair with Books in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies: A Journal of Criticism and Theory* 23: 1, March 2021, 130-146.
- ⁶ J. L. Borges, *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952* (Texas: Texas University Press, 1964), 163-4.
- ⁷ S. Tisseron, *Le jour où mon robot m'aimera. Vers l'empathie artificielle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2015), 28 & 95.
- ⁸ The transitional object was famously illustrated in comics by Charles Schulz's character Linus van Pelt who constantly drags around what he likes to see as his "security and happiness blanket". Siri Hustvedt reminds us that "The transitional object — that bear or bit of blanket — is a real object in the world, but also a 'symbol' radiant with the infant's fantasies of union with his mother that helps ease his separation from her. It is at once 'a piece of real experience' and a fiction." S. Hustvedt, "Freud's Playground", *Living, Thinking, Looking* (London: Septre, 2012), 200.
- ⁹ S. Tisseron, *op.cit.*, 83-92 and 97-116.
- ¹⁰ C. Belsey, *A Future for Criticism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 52.
- ¹¹ "To appreciate a work is not merely to recognize that a work has certain properties, aesthetic qualities or artistic virtues, nor merely to be able to recognize what it is about a work that gives it these qualities or its value. To appreciate a work is, in part, to get the value out of it, and 'getting the value out of it' involves being affectively or emotionally moved. It is to experience the work in certain ways; it involves reading 'with feeling'." S. Feagin, *Reading with Feeling : The Aesthetics of Appreciation* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996), 1.
- ¹² A. Phillips. *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), 109.
- ¹³ "Desire is the engine of life, the yearning that goads us forward with stops along the way, but it has no destination, no final stop, except death. The wondrous fullness after a meal or sex or a great book or conversation is inevitably short-lived. By nature, we want and we wish, and we assign content to that emptiness as we narrate our inner lives. For better and for worse, we bring meaning to it, one inevitably shaped by the language and culture in which we live. Meaning itself may be the ultimate human seduction." S. Hustvedt, "Variations on desire: a mouse, a dog, Buber and Bovary", *op.cit.*, 10.
- ¹⁴ In his book *Brief Apologia for Aesthetic Experience (Petite apologie de l'expérience esthétique, 1972)*, H. R. Jauss ardently defends the thesis that "the attitude of jouissance, which art suggests and triggers, is the very basis of aesthetic experience; it is impossible to ignore this, and on the contrary we must take it as an object of theoretical reflection, if today we want to defend in the face of its detractors — well-read or otherwise — the social function of art and of the scientific disciplines at its service". H. R. Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Trans. T. Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 137.

- ¹⁵ C. Grenier. *La revanche des émotions: essai sur l'art contemporain* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2008), 23: "Ardent défenseur de la distanciation brechtienne, Roland Barthes réintroduit cependant dans *La Chambre claire*, qu'il écrit en 1980, une dimension affective et personnelle qui constitue le signal d'une réorientation de l'ensemble de la communauté intellectuelle française."
- ¹⁶ "Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts [...] unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language". R. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. R. Miller (London: Cape, 1976), 14.
- ¹⁷ G. Loas, A. Verrier and J.-L. Monestes. *Id.*
- ¹⁸ N. Doidge, *The Brain That Changes Itself* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2007), 108.
- ¹⁹ A. Vaillant, *L'histoire littéraire* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), 358. Quote translated by C. Lee.
- ²⁰ R. Jouvent, *Le cerveau magicien. De la réalité au plaisir psychique* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2009), 9.
- ²¹ "Some of us are naturally more attuned to the emotional mind's special symbolic modes: metaphor and simile, along with poetry, song, and fable, are all cast in the language of the heart. So too are dreams and myths, in which loose associations determine the flow of narrative, abiding by the logic of the emotional mind. Those who have a natural attunement to their own heart's voice — the language of emotion — are sure to be more adept at articulating its messages, whether as a novelist, songwriter, or psychotherapist. This inner attunement should make them more gifted in giving voice to the 'wisdom of the unconscious' — the felt meanings of our dreams and fantasies, the symbols that embody our deepest wishes." D. Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 54.
- ²² "Fictions are born of the same faculty that transmutes experience into the narratives we remember explicitly but which are formed unconsciously. Like episodic memories and dreams, fiction reinvents deeply emotional material into meaningful stories, even though in the novel, characters and plots aren't necessarily anchored in actual events." S. Hustvedt, "Freud's Playground", *Ibid.*, 195.
- ²³ J. L. Borges, *On Writing* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 72-3.
- ²⁴ K. Brophy, *Creativity: Psychoanalysis, Surrealism and Creativity* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998), 143.
- ²⁵ D. Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 78-9. The view that emotions would affect reason and cognition was already expressed almost 50 years earlier by W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley in "The Affective Fallacy", *The Sewanee Review* 57: 1 (Winter 1949), 38: "Emotion, it is true, has a well-known capacity to fortify opinion, to inflame cognition, and to grow upon itself in surprising proportions to grains of reason".
- ²⁶ For J. Robinson, "dispassion and disinterestedness in criticism should not mean lack of feeling or personal interest, but rather a fair, balanced (cognitive) assessment of the many different emotional reactions provoked by the work and the various personal interests we feel to be at stake in it". In *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music and Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 133-4.
- ²⁷ In his latest philosophical investigation on the role of emotions in the context of aesthetic experiences, J.-M. Schaeffer's last chapter remains speculative. See *L'expérience esthétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015).
- ²⁸ See S. Keen's long-winded footnote in "Introduction: Narrative and the Emotions", *Poetics Today* 32:1 (Spring 2011), 6. She lists the various and numerous aspects on which emotion researchers differ.
- ²⁹ P. C. Hogan, *Literature and Emotion* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 98.
- ³⁰ For a discussion of empathy as a hypernymic emotion, see "When Fiction Boosts the Social Brain: Empathy, Ethics, Aesthetics and the Enhancing Power of Literary Fiction" ("Quand la fiction dope le cerveau social: empathie, éthique, esthétique et le pouvoir mélioratif de la fiction littéraire") in D. Mistreanu & S. Freyermuth (eds.), *Explorations cognitivistes de la théorie et la fiction littéraires* (Paris: Hermann, 2023), 41-59.
- ³¹ S. Tisseron, *op.cit.*, 33.
- ³² For the most recent publications at the intersection of emotions and literature, see for instance P. C. Hogan, B. J. Irish, L. P. Hogan's (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Emotion* and Suzanne Keen's *Empathy and Reading: Affect, Impact, and the Co-Creating Reader*.
- ³³ T. Todorov, *La Littérature en péril* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007), 30.
- ³⁴ In *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), J. Thrailkill also draws on neuroscience and cognitive psychology to develop

an argument against the New Critics' emotionless interpretations, propounding that feeling should be part and parcel of interpretation.

- ³⁵ D. H. Lawrence, "John Galsworthy," in *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Anthony Beale (London: Heinemann, 1967), 118.

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Myth and Writing in Plato's *Phaedrus*

KYRIAKI GRAMMENOU

Abstract: The question of the origin of writing, as well as its relation to memory and wisdom, constitutes the theme of the myth of Theuth, which appears in the Platonic dialogue titled *Phaedrus*. This paper aims to investigate the elements that link the myth to certain critical keys in Plato's work, as well as to the individual dialogue. I will attempt to critically read the myth in order to present its plot in a way that, without exhausting it, aims to highlight some of its most interesting points. By exploring its place and function within the *Phaedrus*, I will inquire into its authenticity or traditional origin, link the notion of writing to those of time and death, and, last but not rather most importantly I will question the alleged difference between *mythos* (myth) and *logos*.

Keywords: orality, rhetoric, myth vs logos, writing, deconstructive reading

Introduction

The question of the origin of writing, as well as its relation to memory and wisdom, constitutes the theme of the myth of Theuth, which appears in the Platonic dialogue titled *Phaedrus*. Of course, both the dialogue and the myth in question have been the subject of extensive and detailed research, so this paper does not aim at presenting their plot or narrative details. Rather, I am planning to investigate the elements that link the myth to certain critical keys in Plato's work, as well as to the individual dialogue. I will attempt to critically read the myth in order to present its plot in a way that, without exhausting it, aims to highlight some of its most interesting points. By exploring its place and function within the *Phaedrus*, I will study both the content and form of the myth, inquire into its authenticity or traditional origin, and, last but not rather most importantly question the alleged difference between *mythos* (myth) and *logos*.

But, first of all, is it not paradoxical to speak of Plato's myths, that is, the myths produced by a thinker who is famous as their most fervent castigator? Are we obliged to understand this coexistence in terms of a contradiction, similar to the one in which, according to Plato, poets should be both honored and persecuted by the State? Is not myth the opposite of reason, that is, of dialectics – the most appropriate method for the quest for truth? Glenn Most suggests that

It is not surprising that Plato's many readers have always been perplexed by the questions not only of Plato's attitude towards the traditional Greek myths but also of the place of *muthos* within Plato's own works. For no other Greek thinker attacked the traditional myths as violently as Plato did; and yet no other ancient philosopher has inserted so many striking and unforgettable myths into his own works as he did. How is such an apparent contradiction to be explained? (Most 13–14)

Although the opposition between myth and discourse has shaped the history of Western thought – moreover activating a chain of interconnected opposing dipoles – yet the boundaries between the two areas seem to be much more blurred than we are used to imagine.

If we attempt a definition of the concept of myth, we find that “the distinction between myth and logos was not as clear to the ancients as it is to us today. [...] For Plato, then, myths con-

tain elements of truth and therefore their opposition to reason is not absolute. There are many passages that testify to the fluid boundaries between myth and the rest of the logical corpus of Plato's dialogues" (Constantinidi). We are to return to the question of the relationship between myth and discourse later, not, of course, to examine it in general, but to watch its two parts intertwine in the context of the dialogue that is the subject of this article. For now, let us content ourselves with noting that the function of myth in Plato's work cannot be understood without taking into account the pedagogical dimension of his project. The philosopher is interested in psychologically converting his younger interlocutor and urging him to follow the philosophical way of life.

Myths "were intended not only to help to deter people who were making the wrong choice in life, but also to attract people who might yet make the right one" (Most 23). Particularly in the case we are studying here, we are dealing with a myth that is part of a mid-period dialogue. This is the period in which Plato's most pivotal theses are crystallized, and he turns to his auditors to persuade them; not, of course, in the manner of the sophists, but, instead, with the certainty of a speaker who knows both his subject and his audience; and, above all, he is not interested in prevailing in a debate or in training effective and erudite orators. His concern is to write, with real knowledge, into the souls of his pupils, and to teach them what is just, beautiful, and true. Consequently, "philosophical myth is protreptic; it helps to turn people towards the life of philosophy" (Morgan 164).

In other words, the philosophical myth is not a decorative element of the dialogue within which it is inscribed, but constitutes an organic part of and develops with it a relationship of mutual signification. For Plato, myth is far from what we now call by the same name: it is not a story that is merely a product of the imagination; or, at least, this is not its most defining quality: " 'myth' is much closer to what we currently call 'fiction' " (Karamanolis 129). But it is important to remember that "Plato may well be constructing a muthologia, but he is doing so within the horizon, and by the constraints, of logos" (Most 24). However, we will return to this issue later. For now, let us ask what are those elements that make a myth eminently Platonic.

The Platonic Elements of Myth and its Relation to *Phaedrus*

Scholars have traditionally attempted to propose a series of criteria that would allow the categorization of myths on the basis of their content and/or form. A more modern perspective, however, attempts to classify Platonic myths by taking into account the overall communicative context within which they emerge. Glenn Most, for example, finds that "Platonic myths are almost always monologic" and "are probably always recounted by an older speaker to younger listeners" (Most 16); they "go back to older, explicitly indicated or implied, real or fictional oral sources" and "always deal with objects and events that cannot be verified" (Most 17); they "generally derive their authority not from the speaker's personal experience but from the tradition", they "often have an explicitly asserted psychagogic effect", they "are never structured as dialectic but instead always as description or narration" and they "are always found either (a) at the beginning of an extended dialectical exposition or (b) at the end of one" (Most 18).

Which of the above criteria does the myth under consideration meet? The myth of Theuth is indeed monologic and is told by the elder Socrates to the young Phaedrus. It is introduced by the expressions "I have to say what I have heard from the old men" (274 c1) and "I have heard" (274 c5) and thus draws its origin from oral tradition. The heroes of the myth are the gods Theuth and Thamus; the object of the myth is the origin of the writing, which is a matter that does not really lend itself to verification; the aim of the narrative is entertainment, in the sense of converting the hearer and urging him to follow the path of wisdom. Finally, the myth is indeed presented as a narrative rather than a dialectic, and follows, as an organic part, a philosophical argument.

As in the case of the distinction between myth and discourse, however, compliance with these criteria is not absolute, in the sense that the fulfilment of some of the conditions remains open to interpretation. In other words, Plato's text seems to resist our demand for precision and insists on wavering and evading, i.e. playing around: for example, what kind of validity can be derived from the invocation of a tradition –forever lost–, which gets even further undermined by Socrates' rebuke, when he asks Phaedrus: "But you are perhaps interested in who says it and from what place it comes. Why do you not consider only this, whether the thing is so or otherwise" (275c)? And indeed, Morgan points out that "only a sophist cares to be precise in investigating the literal truth of a myth. Far more important is to investigate to what extent myths may be applied as ethical paradigms" (Morgan 160). At this point, however, we ought to be careful: the 20th century has taught us to be fascinated by the polysemy, ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy of the texts we study. And it has given us valuable tools to do so. We must keep in mind that "Plato's myths are a solid story" and

if we are to write myths – and we must, Plato says, write new myths [...] – if we philosophers are to write literature, then we must write a literature that is very sure of itself, without contradictions and which also has a moral lesson. That doesn't sound very nice to us, we want polysemy, polymorphism, conflict and not a moral lesson from art, but Plato probably had that in mind (Kalfas).

Kathryn Morgan attempts a classification of myths in general, which aims to distinguish the Platonic ones from those that Plato considered inappropriate for the search for truth. "We can distinguish three classes", she writes. "Traditional myths such as those told by the poets, educational myths that are intended to exercise social control, and philosophical myths, which are tied to logical analysis" (Morgan 162). The distinction between philosophical and non-philosophical myths, moreover, illuminates the problem we addressed in the previous paragraph concerning our right to recognize ambiguity as an intentional Platonic strategy:

An important characteristic of non-philosophical and pre-philosophical myth was its multiplicity and variety. Narratives existed in many (non-canonical) versions. The rise of a critical tradition marks the beginning of a hostility to such multiplicity. [...] The notion of multiplicity has a deep and uncomfortable resonance for philosophers. Multiple versions of a myth, coupled with poetic unconcern for any principle of verification, are an implicit challenge to a philosophical discourse that aims to discover and communicate a univocal truth (Morgan 36).

Thus, a philosophical myth is to be distinguished "by its univocality. Designed to fit a particular philosophical context, it conveys one meaning and is not easily susceptible to extraction and reformulation in another version" (Morgan 36).

So we are dealing with a myth that meets most of Morgan's criteria, as well as Most's: it is a philosophical fable, monologic, narratively structured, delivered by an elder to a younger hearer and aimed at the education of his soul; it is linked to a fully developed philosophical argument that precedes it while preparing the ground for the contrast between philosophy and rhetoric – which follows; its object concerns persons and facts that do not lend themselves to verification, and derives its force from the appeal to an oral tradition, even if invented: "We have a narrative that is mythical in form, but plausibly transposed to the present, for Socrates' tendency in his commentary is not to talk about what was going on in Egypt, it is to use the occasion of the discovery of writing to talk about the present" (Kalfas, 2018). Moreover, despite the invocation of the past, the myth is created by Plato himself, i.e. it is not an elaborated version of an already existing narrative. Even more crucially, it is designed to convey a non-dogmatic, yet unambiguous message, which, while not prohibiting interpretation, nevertheless hides at its heart a clear and indisputable meaning.

The myth's subject may seem fragmented, or at least decentralized, insofar as it deals with a number of seemingly unrelated topics: love, rhetoric, dialectics, writing, beauty, playfulness, the soul, the gods, the sophists, art. It also seems structured around an unbridgeable breach:

while the first part consists of rhetorical discourses, the second part claims to set an example of dialectical quest. Moreover, the text seems haunted by a multiplicity of voices –and written texts– partaking in a variety of associations: each one imitates the other, reduplicates it, falsifies it, mocks it, replaces it, or even erases it – but only to retrieve its trace anew. Therefore, this polyphony should not mislead us: it is the same voice, always single, the one that weaves into unbreakable unity both the dialogue and the myth, as well as the relationship between them. The myth is designed so as to belong to a particular context, only within which it can acquire its true meaning.

The reconstruction of the structure is particularly crucial for the interpretation of the dialogue. The myth of writing is linked to Isocrates' sibylline invocation on the last page of the text, but also to the episode that triggers the debate: Phaedrus' desire to recite Lysias' speech. This invocation provides the key to the interpretation of the text (Balla).

Similarly, "in the world of the dialogue, Lysias' written speech and the play it instigated are valuable only insofar as they lead to speech and discussion, and the play of the myth is valuable insofar as it prepares us for the discussion of dialectic" (Morgan 227). However baffled the reader may have felt by the odd pairing of the first and second part, we can now view the rhetorical speeches as practical examples, philosophical and otherwise, of rhetoric. We can also watch Phaedrus being transformed through the effect that the orality of the dialectic has on him. For economy's sake, I take it for granted that the reader is familiar with the dialogue's structure. I will now move on to the presentation of the myth's plot.

The Myth of Theuth or the Origin of Myth

The myth about the origin of writing appears towards the end of *Phaedrus*. It is, so to speak, the conclusion of the argument that precedes it, and runs from 274c to 277a. It is narrated by Socrates to young Phaedrus and concerns two deities: god Theuth –who has often been paralleled to Hermes¹– and Thamus, known to the Greeks as Ammon. The myth begins by invoking oral tradition, but, as explicitly noted, its validity does not depend on it: the two interlocutors can, independently, judge whether its message is true. According to the myth, then, the god Theuth, depicted with a human body and the head of a sacred Ibis, addresses the god-king of Egypt and presents him with his seven arts. Plato does not mention the other six, only the invention of writing. Theuth insists that the dissemination of writing among all the king's subjects will prove extremely useful, inasmuch as it will help them to acquire a stronger memory as well as wisdom. The king subverts Theuth's claims by introducing a subtle but crucial distinction: one is capable of giving birth to an art, but another is competent to judge the potential benefit or harm it can cause. Thus, Theuth is indeed the father of the art of writing, but, as such, he cannot clearly see its impact. Instead of being a remedy for memory and wisdom, it will bring about oblivion, it will replace memory with recollection, it will disguise opinion as knowledge, and it will make its disciples unpleasant to interact with.

After the end of the myth, the dialogue goes on: the written word is doomed to remain unchanged through time, to constantly repeat itself regardless of the context in which it is read, to ignore the reader's questions, to address itself indiscriminately to the knowing and the unfit audience alike, to have no voice of its own as it is permanently dependent on the presence of the author-father; above all, to do nothing more than imitate its twin brother: the spoken word. This concept of inauthenticity, of plain imitation, lies at the root of rhetoric.

Hence, rhetoric is an art that demonstrates propositions by means of likeness. The very plasticity of the concept of 'likeness' means that a case can be made that (virtually) anything is like (virtually) anything else". [...] But the restriction of rhetorical demonstration to 'likenesses' (ὁμοιότητες) assures that rhetoric only establishes convictions in the minds of auditors and does not establish anything about true reality (Yunis 186).

Even so, however, the written word is not completely devalued, since Plato attempts a rather subversive move and acknowledges that a written text can prove useful on condition that it is imbued with the principles of philosophy, and that the pursuit of writing is certainly preferable to other entertainments: “The philosopher uses the written text as if he were playing a serious and beautiful game. The game of writing will help him to exercise his memory, to keep it alive. That is, written texts are personal notes, ‘memos’ – they are not a substitute for actual teaching, but they can help to organize and prepare it” (Kalfas & Zographidis).

It is worth noting that, although intended for a specific occasion, Plato’s words foreshadow the criticism levelled against the technology of writing. Thus, in a text written only forty years ago, we read that “writing establishes what has been called ‘context-free’ language [...] or ‘autonomous’ discourse [...], discourse which cannot be directly questioned or contested as oral speech can be because written discourse has been detached from its author” (Ong 77). In his work *Orality and Literacy*, Ong reproduces the Platonic thesis that the written word is the mirror of the spoken word: a text “is a representation of an utterance, of words that someone says or is imagined to say” (Ong 83). But while the mirror may reflect an ever-changing image, written speech “says exactly the same thing as before”, as “a text stating what the whole world knows is false will state falsehood forever, so long as the text exists” (Ong 78).

Thus, we may ask what kind of strategy allowed Plato himself to leave a written work. “Plato”, writes Yunis, “had a personal stake: on the one hand, his massive literary achievement indicates the intensity of his engagement with the new medium of artistic prose aimed at a reading public; on the other hand, the model philosopher at the center of his literary work relies strictly on oral, face-to-face communication for the advancement of his philosophical activity” (Yunis 224). G.R.F. Ferrari offers three accounts for this contradiction: the first, and probably the most prevalent, reads the critique of writing as “as a serious and straightforward expression of Plato’s distrust of the written word, his own writing included, and as an attempt nevertheless to annex a zone –legitimate, but of secondary value to that of the living word– in which to exercise his continuing urge to write” (Ferrari 206).

On the other hand, there is a reading that detects an ironic dimension in the text: “Plato mean[s] the contrary of what he has Socrates say” thus “claiming the highest place for his own peculiar mode of philosophic writing, the written imitation of spoken dialogue” (Ferrari 206). Finally, Ferrari presents the thesis supported by Derrida’s text titled *Plato’s Pharmacy*, which recognizes in the argument against writing “a serious attempt on Plato’s part to argue the value of the spoken over the written word; an attempt which fails, however, for metaphysical reasons which go to the heart of Plato’s whole philosophic enterprise, and which would cause any such attempt to undermine itself”. Ferrari finds that “the critique of writing tries to be the epilogue to the *Phaedrus* but ends up, despite itself, as the theme” (Ferrari 207).

In this article I will dwell a little more on this third reading, precisely because its boldness makes it both fascinating and radical. Such a deconstructive reading has given rise to controversies that not only continue to be part of the philosophical debate today, but even more crucially, concern almost all human activity: knowledge, art, politics. Kakolyris studies Derrida’s reading and suggests that “deconstructive reading treats the text as an ‘undecidable’ phenomenon” (The “Undecidable” *Pharmakon* 227) and concludes that “whenever the philosophical ‘axe’ will seek pure substances or meanings, i.e. islands of monosemy, it will necessarily be confronted with contradictions” (Plato’s *Encyclopedia*). On the other hand, however, Yunis argues that if we adopt Derrida’s reading, “gone not only is Plato the author, but along with him the possibility of receiving his messages, of understanding his arguments, and of appreciating his irony” (Yunis 30). In other words, if we fail to grasp the necessity that regulates the text and protects it from randomness, we will equate it with the deceitful writing of rhetoricians.

Writing, Time, and Death

What does it mean to read a text according to its letter and spirit? And, what is more, is such a reading possible and/or desirable? Let us first try to imagine what strategy would have determined the writing of Plato, a writer who was suspicious of the written word and who preferred living speech instead. "That is, if he believed that philosophy is communicated mainly orally to the right souls via the right method, and that writing, on the other hand, is indeed necessary, what kind of writing would bring a text closer to orality?" (Kalfas, Transcript). Kalfas points out that Plato's philosophical dialogue "is indeed a written discourse, it cannot substitute for the living one, but at least it is structured so as to retain powerful elements of orality, flexibility, defense, versatility, which typical philosophical [...] discourse does not possess" (Kalfas, Plato's Encyclopedia). Let us, then, linger over this contrast between dead letter and living voice and thus return to a question we addressed a little earlier, in the hope that it will shed light on the myth of Theuth.

Earlier, we read Ong suggest that "there is no way directly to refute a text. After absolutely total and devastating refutation, it says exactly the same thing as before. This is one reason why 'the book says' is popularly tantamount to 'it is true'" (Ong 78). Right after this assertion, Ong adds: "It is also one reason why books have been burnt" (Ong 78). The invocation of the burning of books offers Ong the opportunity to relate the written word to death, as opposed to living orality. He finds, then, that "one of the most startling paradoxes inherent in writing is its close association with death. This association is suggested in Plato's charge that writing is inhuman, thing-like, and that it destroys memory" (Ong 80).

At this point, let us turn to literature and attempt to juxtapose Theuth's myth to a modern text which, by reflecting the myth as in a mirror, may shed light on it. In a short essay titled "The Wall and the Books", Borges begins his narration not by citing something he heard, but something he read. He writes: "I read, in past days, that the man who ordered the construction of the nearly infinite Wall of China was that First Emperor, Shih Huang Ti, who likewise ordered the burning of all the books before him" (Borges). The author's goal is stated a few lines later: "That the two gigantic operations [...] were issued from one person and were in a certain sense his attributes, inexplicably satisfied me and, at the same time, disturbed me. The object of this note is to investigate the reasons for that emotion" (Borges). Borges suggests a number of possible interpretations of the emperor's ambiguous act. One of them links writing to the dissolution and restart of time, i.e. immortality and rebirth:

Shih Huang Ti, according to historians, forbade all mention of the word death and searched for the elixir of immortality and secluded himself in a figurative palace, which had as many rooms as the year has days; the data suggest that the wall in space and the fire in time were magic barriers intended to halt the advance of death. [...] Perhaps the Emperor hoped to recreate the beginning of time and called himself The First, in order to be truly the first, and he named himself Huang Ti in order to be in some way Huang Ti, the legendary emperor who invented writing and the compass. The latter, according to the Book of Rites, gave things their true names; equally Shih Huang Ti boasted, in enduring inscriptions, that all things in his empire had the name they merited" (Borges).

And now, with Borges' myth in mind, we can return to Derrida and his reading of the myth. Derrida is concerned with writing's –both used as a medicine and a poison– polysemy. He investigates the function of the Greek term *pharmakon*, about which he writes:

The *pharmakon* would be a substance –with all that that word can connote in terms of matter with occult virtues, cryptic depths refusing to submit their ambivalence to analysis, already paving the way for alchemy– if we didn't have eventually to come to recognize it as antistubstance itself: that which resists any philosopheme, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance; granting philosophy by that very fact the inexhaustible adversity of what funds it and the infinite absence of what founds it (Derrida 70).

Derrida argues that

in the *Phaedrus*, the god of writing is thus a subordinate character, a second, a technocrat without power of decision, an engineer, a clever, ingenious servant who has been granted an audience with the king of the gods. The king has been kind enough to admit him to his counsel. Theuth presents a *tekhne* and a *pharmakon* to the king, father, and god who speaks or commands with his sun-filled voice (Derrida 86).

This is the god Thamus, who “often calls himself the son of the god-king, the sun-god, Ammon-Ra (Derrida 87). Derrida notes that an accepted meaning of Ammon’s name is “the hidden. Once again we encounter here a hidden sun, the father of all things, letting himself be represented by speech” (Derrida 87). The god Thamus, then, is presented with Theuth’s invention, who, apart from being the god of writing –or rather because of it–, also “presides over the organization of death” (Derrida 92) and “records the weight of the heart-souls of the dead” (Derrida 92). “For it goes without saying”, Derrida concludes, “that the god of writing must also be the god of death” (Derrida 91). His jurisdiction over death and consequently time, however, means that “the master of writing, numbers, and calculation does not merely write down the weight of dead souls; he first counts out the days of life, *enumerates* history” (Derrida 92) and he “keeps account of the years on a notched pole” (Derrida 91). Theuth, inventor of the lunar calendar is also an inverted mirror image of Borges’ Chinese emperor – who inaugurated time by reduplicating it. Derrida offers an example that sheds light on Theuth’s power over time.

Nout², cursed by Ra, no longer disposed of a single date, a single day of the calendar on which she could give birth. Ra had blocked from her all time, all the days and periods there were for bringing a child into the world. Thoth, who also had a power of calculation over the institution of the calendar and the march of time, added the five epagomenic days. This supplementary time enabled Nout to produce five children (Derrida 89–90).

Of course, here my concern is not to explore the possible similarities between Borges’ and Derrida’s texts; however, I wish to highlight the analogies that might elucidate both the myth and its relation to the dialogue within which it is inscribed. We can now reread Yunis’ preoccupation registered earlier, who warned that the Derridean reading disregards the logographic necessity that regulates *Phaedrus*, to the extent that Derrida “demonstrates his own freedom (which belongs to any reader) to discover significance in any aspect of the text in relation to any other aspect of the text or indeed of the world” (Yunis 30); at the same time, he stressed that “logographic necessity eliminates chance from artistic discourse and determines the form and content of a discourse down to the smallest detail” (Yunis 193). Derrida, however, seems to share the belief that the myth of Theuth, as narrated by Plato, does remain subject to a set of strict constraints. He writes: “Our intention here has only been to sow the idea that the spontaneity, freedom, and fantasy attributed to Plato in his legend of Theuth were actually supervised and limited by rigorous necessities. The organization of the myth conforms to powerful constraints” (Derrida 85). These constraints, however, ought not to be understood only in terms of content and form, but help us to identify other, more radical laws that impose them. After this literary parenthesis, we can now return to our starting point.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper I referred to the fact that the myth of Theuth is not drawn from tradition, even if it is invoked, but is an invention of Plato. Now, we may add –without negating the authenticity of the myth– that we are dealing with a peculiar loan:

Plato has not simply borrowed, nor borrowed a simple element: the identity of a character, Thoth, the god of writing. One cannot, in fact, speak –and we don’t really know what the word could mean here anyway– of a borrowing, that is, of an addition contingent and external to the text.

Plato had to make his tale conform to structural laws. The most general of these, those that govern and articulate the oppositions speech/writing, life/death, [...]master/servant, first/second, [...]seriousness/play, [...] also govern, and according to the same configurations, Egyptian, Babylonian, and Assyrian mythology (Derrida 85).

We have encountered some of these oppositional dipoles earlier: all of them seemed to reduplicate a founding or even archetypal opposition – that between myth and discourse. Therefore, we can now reflect on what, at the beginning of this paper, we implied about the ambiguity of the boundaries between them. Morgan, in fact, argues that this, supposedly radical, difference is “part of a process of philosophical self-definition and self-presentation” (Morgan 30), which allowed “the rise of philosophical self-consciousness” (Morgan 23). In other words, by inventing a breach between themselves and mythos, both logos and philosophy have managed to disguise their origin and present themselves as radically different from mythos.

If so, Plato does not write myths while submerged in an irresistible contradiction; According to Morgan, “Plato writes myths for precisely the same reason that he writes dialogues: to ward off certainty and keep the philosophical quest alive in terms that acknowledge its fragility” (Morgan 184). Moreover, for Plato myth assumes another function: it protects reason from arrogance and reminds it of the limitations of knowledge. In other words, “Plato’s use of ‘myth’ is indicative of his negative response to the omnipotence of the dialectic, and in this sense it is important because it clarifies the limits as well as the relative value of the dialectic” (Karamanolis 123). This does not mean that we should understand the relationship between myth and discourse in terms of means and ends; “Fiction is not only a means of expression or fulfillment of philosophical ends, but is directly dictated by them and is a discourse congruent to them” (Karamanolis 146). Myth ought to be perceived as the sign of an insurmountable obstacle that is none other than the limitations of knowledge as imposed by the human condition itself. Thus, we can understand Ferrari who insists that, rather than striving to attribute coherence and unity to the *Phaedrus*, we should rather realize that “the seams are meant to show” (Ferrari 204). Similarly, Kalfas suggests that “Plato does not believe that real philosophy can ever take the form of a systematic dogma, that is, a rigid and definite system, even if this system is exposed orally and dialectically. The reason is twofold: on the one hand, language has an inherent inability to express the essence of things, and on the other hand, philosophy is always produced within the soul of the mentee, who is a specific person” (Kalfas, *Plato’s Encyclopedia*).

Towards the end of his book, Ferrari makes another interesting point that helps us to rethink the pedagogical dimension of Plato’s work, which I touched upon in the introduction. Referring to Lysias, whose written discourse is the opening point of the *Phaedrus*, he notes that Lysias was a metic and therefore had no right to speak in public:

He was also not allowed to vote or hold a political position, nor [...] could he appear in person to defend himself if summoned in a lawsuit, but required the good offices of a native patron, a prostates, who would represent him before the citizenry. Here we have a nice irony: Lysias the professional speechwriter, the hidden voice behind so many citizens’ appearances in court – just as he is the voice concealed beneath Phaedrus’ cloak – cannot appear in that forum even when the summons is directed at him in person” (Ferrari 228).

And even when he does speak, his voice “is no free and living voice” (Ferrari 228). Consequently, we realize that neither every written word is dead, then, nor is every voice alive. What guarantees their life, what literally animates and vivifies them is philosophy itself, as “constituted and conceived by the citizens within a community” (Karamanolis 117). Philosophy, then, aims at urging us to search for truth. It is precisely in this sense that the myth of Theuth is both propteretic and psychagogic.

Let us turn for the last time to Ong’s text on the relationship between orality and literacy. There, referring to a poem by Robert Browning, where some dried –commemorative– flowers

are kept within the pages of a book, he observes: "The dead flower, once alive, is the psychic equivalent of the verbal text. The paradox lies in the fact that the deadness of the text, its removal from the living human lifeworld, its rigid visual fixity, assures its endurance and its potential for being resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers" (Ong 80). Thus, we are not dealing with texts that are dead – doomed to keep helplessly repeating their oral origins – but with texts that, like Theuth, enumerate history, and also, like Nout, can resurrect the dead.

In conclusion, let us think, one last time, about the relationship between myth and logos. The *Phaedrus* lends itself to an examination of this relationship, insofar as "it is a myth, and narrates the origins of myth" (Ferrari 216), that is, it explores the boundaries between myth and logos and attempts to reconcile them, not in the manner of the Sophists, but in that of the philosophers. "Mythos", Morgan writes, "marks out content as a narrative, literary, social construct. Its penetration of philosophical discourse reminds us that language is embedded in a real and concrete world. It freights language and emphasises its fragility: all language touches the sphere of mythos" (Morgan 288). If, as we have seen, the human condition forbids absolute knowledge of the just, the beautiful and the true, but only turns to them in search of traces of their absence, then "mythos is the condition of the world we inhabit" (Morgan 291).

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Notes

- 1 Plato seems to ignore this correlation, which "became widespread only from the fourth century". See Harvey Yunis 227.
- 2 Nout or Nut, Nunut, Nent or Nuit is the goddess of the sky, stars, cosmos, mothers, astronomy, and the universe in the ancient Egyptian religion.

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Shining on the Blues: Reading Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" through and beyond Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*

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Abstract: James Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues" and Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* share much in common. Timothy Golden and Robert Reid have both situated the story within Nietzsche's conceptualizations of the Dionysian and Apollonian. However, this paper fills in, revises, and challenges interpretations by Golden and Reid, emphasizing that the story is an explicit dramatization of *The Birth of Tragedy*, with direct references to Nietzsche's ideas regarding the Dionysian ground of experience and the Apollonian impulse to represent that experience. At the end of the story, however, the narrative slips free from the Nietzschean schematization and suggests a transcendent other at work, an otherness that shines on Sonny's blues and effects a release for the narrator.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Apollonian, Dionysian, Sonny's Blues, James Baldwin, Metaphysics, Transcendence

James Baldwin's "Sonny Blues," first published in *Partisan Review* in 1957, is a tragic story about two brothers in Harlem in the 1950's. It explores the socioeconomic, racial, and personal struggles of African Americans through the sounds of blues, jazz, or bebop (depending on which reading of his music to which one subscribes).¹ The poetic conceits and syntactical rhythms make the piece sing. And the song is beautiful. It is also a thoroughly Nietzschean story, one about what to do in the face of the great no, the idea that it is better not to be born or to live a short life (Nietzsche 505). The story's response to the great no is to sing. Because the story borrows so much from Nietzsche's own musings on suffering and self-transcendence (and music), at times almost verbatim, an exploration of how the story subscribes to or departs from Nietzsche's ideas is important.

Two scholars have connected "Sonny's Blues" with Nietzsche's ideas in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Robert Reid believes it is the light (emanating from darkness) of the Dionysian that delivers the narrator from suffering at the end (452). Timothy Golden, on the other hand, believes that the narrator accepts *Sonny's otherness*—his Dionysian reality—and that, as a result, the Apollonian (representative) and Dionysian (non-representative) blend, represented in the cup of trembling (Golden 566-9).² In other words, for Golden, it is not that the narrator transcends his suffering through the annihilation of self as Reid believes; rather, he is able to represent the suffering in a way that does not impose his own standards of living on Sonny. Neither view, however, tells the whole story, for both theories use the Nietzschean idea of tragedy to interpret the narrator's ambiguous release at the end. Upon closer inspection, *The Birth of Tragedy* fails to account for the narrator's experience of the music. The question is not so much whether Baldwin is true to Nietzsche's idea of self-transcendence; the question is whether Nietzsche's idea of (self) transcendence can sustain itself. In short, the story's climax and *dénouement* put Nietzsche's ideas to the test. It is not the agency of the narrator nor of Sonny—or even the music—that occasions the narrator's release from suffering. Attenuated through the music, but separate from it, is a force that releases the narrator. Something shines on the music and, by proxy, the narrator.

The Dionysian

To address the positive metaphysical intrusion at the end, and how it challenges a Nietzschean reading, an engagement with Baldwin's reliance on Nietzsche is important. The story uses so much space to explore suffering that it seems to have arisen out of extensive engagement with Nietzsche. Of course, as a writer giving voice and song to the suffering of African Americans in the 1950's, it is no surprise. But the ways that the narrator and Sonny discuss suffering—their philosophical angles—seem to be borrowed from Nietzsche's pages. The Dionysian, as both Golden and Reid identify, is the foundation Baldwin uses to build the conflict, appearing in story's the settings, dialogue, and the connections between suffering, music, and representation.

Nietzsche characterizes the Dionysian as a paradoxical impulse, one that annihilates the self and, in turn, celebrates that annihilation. The Dionysian is the primordial unity (which, for Nietzsche, was suffering) and is figured best through the notion of drunkenness (501-2). This dual impulse expresses itself in Sonny. He admits the annihilation of the subjective self when he says that when he "was most out of the world," he "didn't really have to play [piano]," that "it just came out of [him], it was there" (Baldwin 134). He is no longer there, but the music, the Dionysian art, is. So, the reader sees competing sentiments: there is both the nowhere of the Dionysian and also the music that springs from forth from it, which Nietzsche suggests is a celebration (501). But it is not a celebration in any conventional sense. This release from suffering comes from a dark celebration of that suffering. Desmond suggests that in Nietzsche one sees "affirmation...in the sundering" (AAO 169).³

So, Sonny's release, figured through the music, is predicated upon his own annihilation. For Baldwin and the characters in this story, it points to the suffering of African Americans, but it is also universal suffering. Blues music (or jazz or bebop), of course, communicates the history of suffering for African Americans and is a clear indication that the music expresses that suffering. Baldwin also draws attention to this in other ways. For instance, when the narrator ruminates on musicians at the end, he says, "What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason" (137). Music's wordlessness, and therefore its triumph and terribleness, is a direct connection to Nietzsche's Dionysian: "...as Dionysian artist he has identified himself with the Primal Unit, its pain and contradiction. Assuming that music has been correctly termed a repetition and a recast of the world, we may say that he produces the copy of this Primal Unity as music" (511). Through this Dionysian music, in other words, the terror of Silenus's tragic words—that it is better not to live—grips and dissolves the subject, making him one with the nameless substratum of being. At the same time, however, the song is elevated to primordial unity. As a result, Sonny appears to the narrator as "some sort of god...or monster" (Baldwin 125). Nietzsche, too, says that, under the Dionysian power, one "feels himself a god" (501). This god is the terrifying god of suffering, a monster indeed.

We see another parallel to Nietzsche's ideas at the end of the story when the narrator, although conceptualizing Sonny's song in terms of "freedom," also figures it as representing what Sonny "had gone through and would continue to go through until he came to rest in earth" (140). Freedom seems to offer relief, but the song that evokes the feeling or promise of freedom is the song of suffering. In other words, music does not mitigate the suffering but sings it. I will return to this later in the paper, for it is central to understanding the otherness at work in the narrator's epiphany at the end.

It is not only Sonny who exists in the drunkenness of the Dionysian. Music and dancing appear at several points in both Nietzsche and Baldwin's work. Nietzsche writes, "In song and dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and speak; he is about to take a dancing flight into the air. His gestures bespeak enchantment" (501). But the Dionysian also [kneads] and [cuts] the individual (502). Going further, Nietzsche says that it "seeks to destroy the individual" (502). These ideas are on display at several points in the story. Just after the narrator reads the news of Sonny's arrest, for instance, he stands in front of a bar and sees a barmaid dancing

and laughing, keeping time with the music as she serves the patrons.⁴ When she smiles, the narrator says one can see “the little girl” and can “sense the doomed, still-struggling woman beneath the battered face of the semi-whore” (107). Communicated in the dancing and music is both the innocence of the little girl *and* the doomed, struggling woman: both freedom—figured through childhood—and suffering, figured through the narrator’s interpretation of her as a “doomed woman” (107). At the same time, however, the Dionysian reunites the subject with the primordial unity, thus the reason the woman’s face appears as a little girl.

The revival meeting on the sidewalk across from the narrator’s place is another example of this quality. After two of the men testify, a woman sings, “Tis the old ship of Zion.” Although the lyrics say, “it has rescued many a thousand,” the narrator says that “not one of them had been rescued” (129). But the woman sings with a “face...bright with joy” (129). As the narrator listens, he says that the people around, once apathetic to the music, begin to focus on “something within” (129): [the] music seemed to soothe a poison out of them; and time seemed, nearly, to fall away from the sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as though they were fleeing back to their first condition, while dreaming of their last” (129). The first and final conditions are, of course, ambiguous and might refer to the oppositions of childhood and innocence and adulthood and the difficult experiences that they face. Or, situated within the Zion motif, it might relate to the African American tradition of using Jewish captivity and freedom as a representation of slavery, the struggles for equal rights, and a promise for deliverance from the racial hardships that they face, the “final” condition being freedom. Either way one sees the individuals’ identities coalesce into a singular, communal consciousness for the narrator, one that recognizes the suffering in the song. Reid believes the song “is simultaneously the slave ship that carries them into bondage and the ship that rescues them from that bondage...” (451).⁵ Sonny comments on this scene once he arrives at the narrator’s house, saying, “it struck me...how much suffering she must have had to go through—to sing like that” (132). For Nietzsche, the Dionysian reminds us of the “phenomenon that pain begets joy, that ecstasy may wring sounds of agony from us” (504).

But the Dionysian appears not only to rise from song and dance. When he picks up Sonny in a taxi, the narrator depicts the neighborhood in violent terms: “Housing projects jutt[ed] up out of [the streets] ...like rocks in the middle of a boiling sea” (112). Likewise, 110th street is described as having a “hidden menace which was its very breath of life” (112). Music is a chthonic force, too, making “the pavement [seem] to shake” (107). At work in these passages is the chaos and suffering of the Dionysian. The darkness and violence of annihilation seeps through the music, and the milieus in general, so much so that the narrator feels as though the ground shakes. This is Nietzsche’s primordial darkness, the substratum of existence (502). Although it has a particular milieu, the suffering of African Americans in Harlem, for Nietzsche it is also the primordial darkness of everyone’s existence. All these connections between music, drunkenness, darkness, and earthquakes are reminiscent of the Dionysian seeking to “destroy the individual” (502).

The Apollonian

Both Golden and Reid see the narrator as representative of the Apollonian impulse. Nietzsche explains the Apollonian as “that freedom from the wilder emotions, that philosophical calm of the sculptor-god” (500). Although the world, as Nietzsche sees it, is unintelligible, through his calm demeanor, the Apollonian figure is ‘the shining one,’ the deity of light [and] also the ruler over the fair appearance of the inner world of fantasy” (500). He makes the world intelligible through art (the plastic arts or poetry). When discussing the narrator, however, both Golden and Reid focus primarily on the “ordered” side of the narrator’s Apollonian nature rather than the artistic side. For both scholars, the narrator’s ideas of himself and the world around him are, while ordered, illusory. He deceives himself with his dreams. Golden believes that “his occupation and lifestyle” as “an algebra

teacher...one who has mastered the symmetry and necessity of mathematical operations..." lead him to believe that a "bourgeois lifestyle will yield a life free from tragedy, similar to the way that performing the same mathematical operation on both sides of an algebraic equation will always yield the correct answer" (566). Reid believes the narrator "attempts to save himself through assimilation of the values of the white myth" (444). For Reid, the narrator has superimposed onto his suffering the idea of his own success, but this idea of success does not reflect his reality of suffering, for, although he might have a respectable job, the darkness of Harlem surrounds him (444).

Because he suggests the narrator creates illusions, Reid is closer to understanding the relationship between the narrator and the Dionysian.⁶ Golden does not consider the artistic dynamics of the narrator. And neither scholar accounts for the fact that the Dionysian works in tandem with the Apollonian to create tragedy. The Apollonian figure takes the terror of the Dionysian and makes words (or sculptures or paintings) out of it. Nietzsche explains the relationship this way:

...we may picture him sinking down in his Dionysian drunkenness and mystical self-abnegation, alone, and apart from the singing revelers, and we imagine how now, through Apollonian dream-inspiration, his own state, i.e., his oneness with the primal nature of the universe, is revealed to him in a symbolical dream-picture. (502)

It is not so much that the narrator has created a world different from the reality of his suffering. It is, rather, that the suffering undergirds the effort to represent. The representations come from the suffering. They do not come from adopting an outside dream-image, such as Reid's idea of the white myth. Nor do they come from a mode altogether separate from art, such as the tidiness of an algebraic equation, as Golden believes.

In other words, the narrator is *not* blind to his, Sonny's, nor his community's suffering; it takes only a cursory reading to see that he is acutely aware of his own suffering. In the boys' mocking, denigrating laughter at school, for instance, he hears Sonny *and* himself (104). From that suffering, the narrator dreams. The Dionysian is everywhere, but it is communicated through language. Nietzsche says, after all, that the Apollonian impulse is an "important part of poetry also" (499).

The Interplay of the Dionysian and Apollonian

While the poetry, or his narration in general, is Apollonian in nature, the rhythms of the Dionysian inform his mode of storytelling. We see this on display when he takes liberties with conventional standards of language. The first two sentences of the story serve as a great example: "I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again" (103). In neither sentence does one see conventional grammar. In fact, the grammar undermines the very same parallel structure in two ways, first by eliminating the "and" and using only commas to separate the phrases and, second, by adding "and" between the parallel phrases without commas. Although his words are not a song, they are song-like, mirroring the rhythms and improvisational nature of jazz music. The Dionysian music lurks in the structures of the Apollonian.

The narrator's conversation with Sonny about suffering reveals this interplay as well. He wants to tell Sonny "about will power and how life could be—well, beautiful" (133). He continues, "I wanted to say that it was all within; but was it? Or, rather, wasn't that exactly the trouble? And I wanted to promise that I would never fail him again. But it would all have sounded—empty words and lies" (133). Rather than speaking the words out loud, he makes the promise to himself and prays he "would keep it" (133). This is an interesting position for the beauty seer, questioning his own resolve, a slip of the *principium individuationis*, as Nietzsche, after Schopenhauer, puts it in *The Birth of Tragedy* (500). Although he wants to comfort Sonny with the idea of beauty and meaning, something holds him back, and he is unable to superimpose his representative language onto the feeling of hopelessness he has. But there is a doubling at work, for he communicates that lack *through* language. It is a moment during which the Dionysian impulse evokes despair and then the despair is reigned in through the use of working out that terror through words by making an Apollonian promise.

The extensive use of darkness metaphors also points to the Apollonian artist figuring the Dionysian (not evading it, as Reid and Golden believe). For instance, he is attuned to the power of darkness as a metaphor for suffering. On the subway train, once he reads the news of Sonny's arrest, he feels "trapped in the darkness which roared outside" (103). Similarly, Nietzsche's Apollonian figure sits "quietly in his tossing barque, amid the waves" (509). The narrator sees Nietzsche's waves in the darkness of the subway. He does not blind himself to them. He represents them through metaphor, the dream image.

At the end of the story, one sees the language of the narrator echo Nietzsche to an even greater extent. He says, "But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air" (Baldwin 137), echoing Nietzsche's idea that the Apollonian impulse imposes order onto the horror of the suffering of existence: "The Greeks knew and felt the terror and horror of existence. That he might endure this terror at all, he had to interpose between himself and life the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians" (505-6). "Imposing" and "interpose" are strikingly similar here. In this case, the narrator claims that Sonny imposes music onto the void much like the Greeks interposed the Olympians onto the terror of existence.

When Sonny begins to play, he falters at first, trudging along, while Creole tries to coax him into stepping out. When he finally does, Nietzsche raises his head again. The narrator believes Sonny's playing becomes "very beautiful because it wasn't hurried and it *was no longer a lament*" (Baldwin 140). This transformation of lament into praise is a direct reference to Nietzsche: "At the Apollonian stage of development, the 'will' longs so vehemently for this existence [life despite suffering], the Homeric man feels himself so completely at one with it, that lamentation itself becomes a song of praise" (506). Further, the narrator says, "I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting" (*my emphasis* Baldwin 140). For Nietzsche, this transformation occurs as a reversal of the Dionysian dictate that it is better not to live. The Greeks, Nietzsche believes, transfigured the suffering of the Dionysian through the representation of the gods as humans so that living becomes heroic. In this passage, Sonny's song is a song of suffering, that it is better not to live, but the narrator, through his Apollonian agency, interposes his representative gods onto the music, thus reversing the sentiment. Suddenly, it becomes heroic for the narrator (and Sonny) to live. This reading challenges Reid's idea that the music "replaces blind faith in the imprisoning symbols" (452).⁷ According to Nietzsche, the Apollonian figure maintains his use of imprisoning symbols.⁸

In the relationship between the two impulses, Nietzsche sees a "picture of [man] sinking down in his Dionysian drunkenness and mystical self-abnegation, alone, and apart from the singing revelers" and then, through the Apollonian "dream-inspiration," the man's "oneness with the primal nature of the universe... is revealed to him in a symbolic dream-picture" (502). The aloneness and then union with others through dream-inspiration is exactly what Baldwin captures at the end. At first, the narrator sits alone in the crowd, apart from the singing revelers and disconnected from Sonny. Then, when he hears Sonny play, the symbolic dream pictures of the Apollonian appear; he sees his deceased daughter, his mother, the road upon which his uncle died, and his wife's tears (140).

After hearing Sonny play, the narrator orders a drink for Sonny. Sonny takes a sip and nods at the narrator, and the narrator says, as Sonny begins playing again, that the cup "glowed and shook above [his] brother's head like the very cup of trembling" (141). The cup of trembling has been the central hermeneutical focus of the story for many scholars. For instance, Tracy believes the cup represents a "holistic vision," bringing together the myriad genres (jazz, blues, and Gospel) that Sonny plays (165). For Tracy, this blending represents a blending of the sacred and secular to give voice, or song, to the communal experience of African Americans and, thus, [ameliorate] their isolation, despair, and loneliness" (164). McParland thinks the cup represents Sonny: "[He] is that cup and its contents, mother's milk and song of life, the heat, the sting, and swirl of hard liquor" (138). Knepper believes the cup is "an ambiguous but perhaps hopeful allusion to Isaiah 51:22" pointing to the possibility that

this moment draws the narrator and Sonny "closer" and occasions a "deeper understanding and new acceptance of what they cannot understand" (148). Hobson believes that the cup must be understood within the trajectory of exile, slavery, and deliverance of the Children of Israel (45–80). And Golden believes that it represents a blending of the Apollonian and Dionysian impulses, a coming together of sorts of the narrator and Sonny.

The pattern of allusions to Nietzsche's work suggests that Golden is perhaps closest in interpreting the symbol: suffering (the liquor) and the Apollonian redemption of suffering communicated through a Judeo-Christian lens: milk from the land of milk and honey from the Old Testament. When the substances are mixed, their composition becomes the work of art, much like Nietzsche sees Raphael's *Transfiguration*,⁹ mixing both suffering (the liquor) and art (milk as religious conceit)—or, as Golden believes, the two characters coming together in brotherly understanding and the narrator finally accepting, and relating to, Sonny's differences.

As a result, the story also points to transfiguration. The cup of trembling¹⁰ and the glow above Sonny's head suggest that the narrator has transformed Sonny into a saint. He is no longer the brother he cannot understand. Rather, Sonny becomes more than a brother to him. He becomes a glowing representation of redemption, a suffering savior carrying the weight of his people. He sips from the cup of trembling, for this is his lot. The narrator finally understands Sonny's burden. Because he now understands Sonny's suffering, the narrator erects a representational monument (the image at the end) of him.

Beyond the Dionysian and Apollonian

But this is where the Nietzschean thread stretches taut, for if the basis of Dionysian suffering is the great no—or forming a dream out of the no—is it possible to transcend at all? In other words, how can a "no" ever be a "yes?" For philosopher William Desmond, it cannot. Although the narrator says that the musician "is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air" (Baldwin 137), the void is no-thing, so it cannot provide the materials for creation. Whatever the musician does in the throes of musical possession is not done *creatio ex nihilo*; it must be created out of an abundance of "otherness," as Desmond puts it (AOO 2). The prior cannot be reconfigured into "something." "Creation," Desmond writes, "is more than an imposition on flux, for something original, something marvelously original, comes to be, comes to shine" (GOB 101). Likewise, if it arises out of suffering, how can suffering be redemptive without an outside force? In short, whether the foundation of being is conceptualized as suffering or nothing, the self cannot transform it without something outside of suffering or nothingness.¹¹

Desmond contends that Nietzsche's self-transcending "yes" to suffering only seems to transcend the great no because it is "finally engulfed by the horror" (AOO 15). He writes, "There is much appealing in Nietzsche's desire to say 'yes,' but if the [Dionysian] origin is as he describes it to be, this 'yes' must be despite its darkness, and a 'yes' despite is not quite the 'yes' Nietzsche desired. It is the darkness again, and horror before being more than joy" (AOO 15). Considering the story, the matter might be figured this way: If the narrator transcends his suffering—however briefly—he must transcend it by not embracing the darkness but becoming free from it. And, further, this freedom is given, not derived from the self. The darkness is the point of pivot, not the force that births the freedom or self-transcendence. If the self must embrace the dark, elemental suffering of the Dionysian, from where does the agency to transcend come? In other words, as Desmond writes, "tragedy asks a willing that one cannot just will" (AAO 169).

After questioning whether this shine is a result of the self, Desmond suggests that this experience of otherness is "not first our construction" (GOB 2–3). Instead, "there is something given, something awakening, something delighting...something of invitation to transcendence" (3). He writes,

Revealed as creations, a light shines on things from beyond every closed whole. The shine on things has metaphysical and theological significance, beyond reduction and deconstruction. We behold the

lilies of the field, but does the shine on things tell of a light that endows our power of enlightening? Does this light, neither of us or things, give things of beauty whose luster wakes in the soul a song of praise? (102)

While listening to the music, the narrator believes that in the music, one can hear how to be “free” (Baldwin 139). The power of Sonny’s music, then, is not the result of Sonny nor the narrator but, rather, the Original at work, shining on the music. When Sonny begins to “make the song his...it [is] no longer a lament.” (140). This undermines the reading that the music transcends the experience of suffering independent of an abiding otherness. The “freedom...around [them]” that the narrator experiences points to something greater than his lived reality. Knepper writes, “Desmond argues that a true ‘yea-saying’ must acknowledge a primordial goodness of being” in contrast, of course, to the primordial suffering of being (Knepper 164).¹²

Hobson points out that in Baldwin’s story “Just above My Head,” the character Jimmy “Hears something,’ or, rather, ‘something hears him,’ becomes aware of the artist’s ability and uses him or her as single-mindedly as a saxophonist uses that instrument” (Hobson 48). Hobson continues, “This ‘something,’ not further defined, is the link between the experience of millions” (48). The same can be said of Sonny. Something “uses” Sonny and, thus, transforms the blues to inarticulate wonderment.

Perhaps more importantly, the narrator says that the music “brought something else back to [him] and carried [him] past it” (140). This sentence serves as the most poignant indication of the otherness of the experience, for the vagueness of “it,” “something else,” and “carried him past it” are telling it slant, as Emily Dickinson might call it. It might be that it serves as an introduction to the memories of the death of his daughter and his wife’s tears, but none of the other memories that come to him is foregrounded syntactically as such:

I saw my mother’s face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones of the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father’s brother died. *And it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it.* I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel’s tears again, and I felt my own tears begin to rise” (*my emphasis* 140).

In other words, his experience in this sentence is beyond the ability to signify, pointing to Desmond’s idea of the Exceeding Origin, which cannot be reduced by any self-determining mechanism and to which we respond with “agapeic astonishment” (Desmond *BB* 251 and *AOO* 108–109).

The culmination of emotions here is titillating. The memories of tragedy appear, and the narrator is “carried past” them (140). Suffering is transcended. It is also interesting to note the agency of the narrator here. He is not the one carrying. It is the music—or what the music (from the Originating Other) communicates. He is “a patience of being before [he is] an endeavor to be” (Desmond 3). Desmond writes, “Our *passio essendi* is on the boundary between receiving and responding—responding that may itself become creative in attempting to bring into being works of art in communication, secretly or more openly, with the originating reception” (*GOB* 3). The music is a gift that the narrator is open to receive. But the music also opens the narrator to the gift. This cannot happen through self-determination or through the power of unmitigated suffering but, rather, something beyond the self’s capabilities. The language also slips from the Nietzschean drama, for “something else” and “carried me past it” both evade symbolic representation. “Carried me past it” suggests that the narrator is carried *beyond* suffering; he is no longer responding to suffering. But both phrases, especially “carried me past it,” undermine a Nietzschean reading, for the experience of the narrator is beyond the Apollonian capacity to represent it.

Conclusion

Throughout most of the story, a dialectical relationship exists between suffering and representation. The narrator mitigates suffering through representation, the Apollonian figure taking the primordial chaos of the Dionysian and superimposing symbols or words upon it. At the end, how-

ever, when the narrator's speech falls short of representation through its ambiguities, one sees an outside force at work. Such a reading does not undermine its cultural import. The idea of freedom, though ambiguous, does not mean that it is an empty signifier. Rather, it indicates an abundance of feeling, and the reader intuits that this multivalent freedom exists in relation to the suffering of those in Harlem. The otherness, God, Goodness, Truth, or however one might define the otherness, descends to the suffering and harrows it, and, by harrowing it, transforms those who suffer. It is a testament to the power of hope. In this way, the argument is consistent with what Tracy, Hobson, Knepper, *et al* interpret as the promise of deliverance. The otherness of the experience illuminates the tragedy of their lived experience and promises release; it is a vision shown and a promise made from beyond them, not born of their suffering. It is no surprise that this was written during the Civil Rights movement. Baldwin's vision captures the zeitgeist of the era, situating then (de)situating it so that oppression and freedom from oppression are not figured in simple cultural axioms but, instead, given metaphysical weight. It is a call to hope, a hope in beauty despite suffering and the beauty of the (free) world on the horizon.

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Notes

- ¹ For more explorations on genre, see Tracey Sherard's "Sonny's Bebop: Baldwin's Blues Text as Intracultural Critique," *African American Review*, 32:4, (1998), 691-705.
- ² Reid also believes the narrator at first adopts the Apollonian. He calls this the white man's image and says that the narrator, because of his job as a teacher and his place the middle class, believes he has escaped the darkness of the "brothers" (444-5).
- ³ Desmond also suggests that this affirmation in sundering is consistent with what "Nietzsche... communicated to us...[:] he would not have seen what he had seen, been blessed as he was blessed. And perhaps cursed" (AOO 169).
- ⁴ For a discussion of how laughter operates like music in the story, see James Nikopoulos's "A Kind of Joy': Laughing and Grinning through 'Sonny's Blues.'" *James Baldwin Review*, 8.1, 2022. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/JBR.8.3>
- ⁵ Reid also suggests that it is an Apollonian image that uses "death" as a representative salve for despair. The ship, then, also represents the end of their suffering by killing them (451).
- ⁶ It is important to keep in mind that nothing in the story—as represented—can be Dionysian; it can only point to the Dionysian because the Dionysian cannot be represented in words, only music. And here we see words representing music, so the story is a step removed. What we read reflects an effort *toward* order. Just as much, interestingly, as Nietzsche himself was writing toward understanding, writing about something about which language cannot represent.
- ⁷ It is important to remember that Reid identifies the symbols as the "white myth." I addressed this earlier in the paper.
- ⁸ Golden avoids schematizing the Apollonian and Dionysian in his interpretation of *the narrator's* experience of listening to Sonny play. He says only that the music—"when words cease,"—allows the narrator to "fully appreciate Sonny" (166).
- ⁹ About Raphael's Transfiguration, Nietzsche writes, "Here we have presented, in the most sublime artistic symbolism, that Apollonian world of beauty and its substratum, the terrible wisdom of Silenus; and, intuitively we comprehend their necessary interdependence" (508).
- ¹⁰ Golden says Sonny does not drink from the cup, suggesting the cup of suffering is passed from him (Golden 156); however, Sonny sips from it (Baldwin 141).

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Best of all Possible Worlds?

VICTOR PETERSON II

Abstract: The following details the importance of modality when analyzing the articulation of our state of affairs and provides an argument against pessimism. Our endeavor's argument follows from a renewed consideration of Leibniz's logical consideration of ours being the best of all possible worlds. In so doing, the essay utilizes an updated analysis of the modal construction of alternative states of affairs.

Keywords: pessimism, optimism, melancholia, articulation

Man is equally incapable of seeing the nothingness from which he emerges
and the infinity in which he is engulfed.

– Blaise Pascal

Is this the best of all possible worlds? Answers seemingly invoke conservatism, pessimism, melancholia, or optimism. Arguments ranging from Leibniz in the affirmative to Fred Moten's assertion that it's not, but it's the only one we have in *Black Ops*, to Achille Mbembe's or Paul Gilroy's analyses of melancholia owing to optimism's failure. (see Gilroy, Mbembe; and Moten 1743–1747) Our inquiry is one of modality. What would *necessarily* have to be the case in order to make the determination that this *is* the best possible world? I will make the case that despite distinctions between optimism and pessimism, talk of a perfect world, one necessarily so and, therefore, universal, should be forgone. By bracketing these arguments, we recognize the creative means by which what is apparent is put to use in different ways. Optimism and pessimism are revealed as subcomponents of a composite function whose output are differently labeled given the conditions in which that function is applied. And yet, those output obtain a functional-equivalence across the states of affairs articulating a world-image in ways relevant, yet unforeseen, in the domains where those practices are cultivated. Consequently, our functional reorientation claims that the world articulated would be meaningful to those inhabiting it with no need to appeal to a non-worldly world to organize its affairs.

Consider the traditionalist argument. If the world is created from perfection then nothing imperfect follows from it. Perfection may give rise to an appeal outside of the world to which we have access, and in going this route, that appeal's inevitable. That primary cause becomes necessary and sufficient for creation, that necessity making it the case that this assumption holds in every possible successor from that cause. A world created from these conditions must, in principle, also be perfect. Yet this world would be a subset of those initial conditions. It follows that the inhabitants of these conditions would, by necessity, also be perfect; their horizon of possibility making the relations obtaining between them a subset of those secondary conditions. However, this possibility leads to a regress, for by necessity these inhabitants would have to at least be equal to their priors to maintain perfection but, by definition, they cannot be greater than their primary cause. A subset of a subset of causal conditions, this world's inhabitants mark a point of corrosion in the well ordering of this system. If greater than their cause, then those initial conditions would be a proper subset of themselves, an infinite regress by definition; if equal to, then their cause is indeterminate; and if less, those inhabitants do not have access to the primary cause with which they substantiate their determination of perfection. It appears that they would only have access to the conditions following their instantiation.

Etymologically, pessimism sets in at this point of corrosion, inducing a reaction of optimistic reclamation of what's been lost or for another world. If traditionalism proves an infinite regress, utopia seems to recede as a melancholic operation to construct a world in which perfection obtains and converges towards the limit outlined above. The content of the operation expressing melancholia and the function of finding utopia, classically defined as the no place, do not converge towards some world-thing, and as such are equivalent prior to assertion. This functional-equivalence is interesting as a function is an abstract object in which some aspect of a domain and another of a subdomain, forming a pair that are an element of that function, entails that if the same aspect from that domain pairs with one from a subdomain and another from different subdomain, then those subdomains' aspects are functionally-equivalent. As in Edouard Glissant said in *Poetics of Relation*, from the view of the domain of projection, one aspect represents the reverse image of the other prior to their projection in the contexts in which we attempt to see if that concept, once decoded in terms relevant to that domain, are said to play a role in explaining a relationship between the world-view previously encoded by that function. A relation between aspects of the world, not what's in it.

The optimism-pessimism, utopia-melancholia, connection is as old as Aristotle's *Problema*. These world-related states induce a cycle in which, determined from terms indexing the present world-view, their use enforces a self-fulfilling state, solidifying one's world membership to which they only have access through those terms. Collapse of a view's certainty—see cynicism-absolutism below—evinces a desire for what may have never been. (Gilroy 6) If only knowable as a function of what is known, the perfection of first causes would be unrecognizable to those subjected to it. Perfection is, by definition, incomparable to the world we have to compare it to.

How so? Consider optimism is based upon a vision of utopia and a pessimism producing melancholia from utopia's inaccessibility. This process can be defined through functional composition. Treating poetic relation seriously, poetic composition occurs when the output of one operation becomes input for another, relating those operations by way of an image of those now composite conditions, licensing those operations in the first place. There is a set of features indexing a "world" in which either the function of pessimism, whose output, melancholia, is reproduced in the conditions that follow; or optimism, whose output, utopia, is reproduced. In a possible world-successor, melancholia obtains; in another successor, the converse is true. Thus, melancholia is not-utopia and utopia is not-melancholia. If necessity entails that one position obtains in every possible world following some initial conditions, then consider a universal statement regarding all possible worlds. This can only be stipulated externally to that world as no world is greater than the n^{th} world-successor, thus making that determination equivalent to the operation enumerating possible worlds.

From the position at which that determination is possible, we would need to say that those initial conditions are characterized as the best possible world and, for all worlds, if this is the best then so is its successor, therefore all the possible worlds following that instantiation are the best. The best world being our constant, and a function indexing that constant the means of articulating a best-successor, in order to determine this notion for the whole series we would have to say that the functional-content of that determination for the n^{th} world is determined by the n^{th} function of that n^{th} world's successor. This operation can be formalized but not computed. From a stance in the future, both utopia and melancholia could both be true until instantiated. If one instantiation leads to the other, from that future stance it's possible that both could be true although contradictory now. So from outside the system, since melancholia is not utopia and utopia not melancholia, they are functionally-equivalent if evaluated at no one world in particular, equivalent to any one world before we determine the world we occupy. Indistinguishable from the stance of a future in which we could make a determination regarding prior instantiations, each seems futile.

As "best world"-related operations, optimism and pessimism are considered the functional-content of utopian and melancholic propositions. "We can represent a proposition by a set of possible worlds—the set of worlds in which the proposition is true. Equivalently, we can represent a proposition as a *function from possible worlds to truth values* . . . we can represent intensions of various kinds

as functions from possible worlds to extensions of various kinds. . . we can represent the intension [content] of a predicate [conditions-description] as a function from possible worlds [context indexed by that predicate] to the set of objects which falls under that predicate in the relevant possible world. Similarly, we can represent the intension of a singular term as a function from possible worlds to individuals. “ (Taylor 201) Utopia and melancholia are state descriptions. The function of the object (=thought) they index *is* that object prior to that function’s use. As predicates characterizing a state, these functions appear in the object position of our determinations regarding a possible world. (Graff Fara) Their functional-content—optimism and pessimism respectively—indexes their use to the conditions described by that determination. As the object of this characterization, they reference their conditions of application, not a thing in the world, although acting as constituting members of that world, as world concepts. We can conceive their operation as a means of articulating a world through their use, organizing our experience; as an emergent, palpable, quality of the world.

As a result, we find utopian arguments make for melancholia on the ground. So what prompts Fred Moten’s argument that, “[t]his bitter earth is the best of all possible worlds. . .” A “fact” that brings in the modal thought-experiment below. This contention “necessitates” an “imaginative” and “open,” therefore recursive operation, for Moten. For Gilroy, the onset of melancholia inevitably leads to cynicism (=absolutism) or nihilism, a moral determinism and onto-epistemological evacuation of the content of the world(s) we inhabit by way of our characterization of particular states of affairs. (see Mills and Silva) Thus, utopian arguments are seen as leading to modal collapse. If this world is the best world then it is necessarily the best world. We can formalize necessity by stating that this world is necessary if and only if for any determination of this world given that determination, so is that world. Consequently, we determine possibility as what’s not-necessarily-not the case. As a result, what’s not-possibly-not is equivalent to necessarily. Definitionally, we immediately see that if this world is necessarily the case, then either we can’t determine this as the best world or this world is the best given our determination. Given no way to determine if it’s the best possible world, there is no world to make that determination. Odd. Therein lies the possibility that we can make a determination that this is the best world and yet it would have no content. Our ability to determine it as such cannot arise. A determination is possible if and only if there is not a world such that if that determination’s made, then we would find that that world and its antithesis arise.

But how would one be able to know that this is the best possible world without its complement? What is the consequence of necessitation? “If it’s the case, then necessarily so,” is equivalent to “if not necessarily so then not the case.” This is equivalent to if possibly not the case then not the case, revealing an embedded possibility in that claim, a modal collapse. Necessitating a fact leads to many conundrums. Consider our recent discourse and dismay over alternative facts and right-wing conservatism.

It follows that necessity follows from possibility and what is possible is necessarily possible. (see Barcan-Marcus) A world is necessary only if for a universe (=world of worlds), that world is the case but that universe must be possible and is possible only if there isn’t a world that contradicts itself when articulated. The universe comes first, but its members is a matter of articulation; if a contradiction arises, the possible world description is forgone, not the universe itself. If no world and its constitutive rules can be shown, then no claim about it is possible for that world is determined by the constitutive rules licensing the claims within and only within it.

A fiction has rules in which statements in it are true but untrue when violating those rules or taken outside the domain determined by that world. Consider, if a world is the case, then it is necessarily so given that world, thereby the world is possible and possible necessarily. But suppose it’s possible that it doesn’t exist, the claim would be vacuously true because nothing could be produced to contradict it, allowing anything to follow; or, by the necessity of possibility, it is necessarily possible that it doesn’t exist, meaning it is not possible that it’s not possible that it doesn’t exist, it’s not possible that it necessarily exists. But this contradicts our earlier determination, so it is not possible that that world is not the case and therefore it is necessary to have a world in order to make that possibly necessary determination.

The above raises a good question. If necessity is closely tied to universal quantification and as such can be vacuously true, is this so for possibility as well? Showing that universality can lead to statements like, “for all there exists,” that presupposition translates into “there is not something that’s not not for all that’s not,” i.e. there is nothing such that for all there’s not. We make the argument that what is possible is necessarily so. How then do we answer whether possibility is vacuous?

Consider a space framed between two axes wherein we index a point (=position or location) in that space. We can consider this space prior to framing as composed of infinite possible points. Infinity here should not cause worry because as such we can properly define it without having to enumerate each point and each point is as yet occupied. The set of all possible points can be put into one to one correspondence with a proper subset of itself. Zero fits this definition and functionally can be considered an object of a domain. One to one correspondence can be defined through our definition of a function. An element of a domain and another of a sub/co-domain’s pairing is an element of that function, an object determining a relation between domains. A selection from one domain composes a relationship to the other domain by way of a correspondence between their elements; selection of a marker from one axis paired with one from the other. As such, relations in one domain are said to be a reverse image prior to the projection of that function onto the same relationship in the other. That function represents the co-domain in the other, not as an element but as an encoded relationship between elements. Therefore, a function represents the zero of this composite relationship, i.e. what determines possible relationships between domains prior to composition.

To draw a line from one point to another maps a distance between them. Distance can also be called an “interval,” a significant term in systems of space and time that will be useful below. Calculating this distance follows from triangulation, taking the root/“route” of the sum of the squared differences between two point’s “coordinates.” These distances can be determined up to however many coordinates we need, adding dimensions. If we were to add two more axes framing a three-dimensional space, then travel across that line would give us a change in distance with respect to a fourth axis. When these “lines” share a point, they outline shapes in that field. Triangles in two-dimensions, cones in three, space itself is shaped. Movement in two-dimensions gives the distance traveled; in three, an entity filling the outlined formation garners momentum (=spin); in four, its trajectory curves. Space, then, is shaped by the formations in it. The closer up, the more Euclidean a form appears; zoom out and we find that contours abound. A spherical space is defined by formations moving out from a central point in all directions along lines at different distances passing through that central region in all directions. For example, consider the pull-action on a Hoberman sphere toy with objects following lines within the sphere. Sets of distances within it can be considered as axes to define regions within that sphere. Forms are projected to the surface of the sphere at different rates. Measuring a distance on the projected surface of that space means that each coordinate difference is taken in relation to the maximum rate of change possible in that space in addition to an interval on a fourth that vanishes but is implied when considering a three-dimensional object. We can visualize the shape of the surface as well as formations within and sinking into that sphere. Consequently, formations in this space have spin, garner momentum, and collide, generating energy. Terms equally applicable to physical, socio-cultural, as well as political formations.

Space, then, is constituted internally as the distance achieved between coordinates moving in four-dimensions. Four-dimensions allows us to conceive of a universe with infinite interior and no exterior, bound yet open internally to different formations. If a region is considered exterior to the space, that very same region would have to be in sight of a formation within the sphere projected out to the surface, immediately making it part of a universe that is a proper subset of itself. Modal collapses stemming from universal necessity shows that there’s room to consider that what can be constructed, in some sense, is necessarily possible. An elegant way to put the first and last lines of Asaph’s 82nd psalm, this concept shows that infinity is not necessarily a thing in total, but a concept grasped by the function of its method of construction which, when decoded in terms relevant to the

model organizing phenomenal experience, is determinately real. (Gödel 12; Sobel 241–261). Consequently, our model can be and is used in physical terms.

Stuart Hall and Sylvia Wynter, methodologically and philosophically, intimate that encoding/decoding practices can be used via this model to study relations in the world. Shifts in relations in the model become the reverse image projected onto a region in this world of worlds, organizing experience, according to Glissant. Consider each coordinate indexing a feature of the world with distances across that manifold relating those features in such a way that they begin to outline the shape of some phenomenon. That “shape” encodes a concept that when projected is tested to see the extent to which those indexed relations apply, what that outline “captures.” When projected in space and held in relation to others, that shape is decoded in terms relevant to others so that if that phenomenon appears in both frames, one can be said to experience that phenomenon in the world. The world then involves a phenomenal space into which our concepts (=encodings) are mapped, morphing internally as it is projected outward since this encoding/decoding capacity is the means through which we access the world, therefore placing us in it for these relations are abstracted from that world.

An argument put forward by David Lewis shows how many entities and their modes of expression are possible without having to count them all. Henry Louis Gates Jr. allows for the argument to be decoded and then reencoded in terms relevant to our discussion by considering axes as semantic and rhetorical, mapping modes of expression to modalities of inhabiting the space framed by those axes. Considering all points in four-dimensions implies a set of points by which any determination would be a subset of itself. We can enumerate these points without having to count them by considering each in terms of equivalence classes of pairs indexed along each axis, providing coordinates whereby a pair of indices and a pair of their successor is equivalent to the sum of the first and last of each pair.¹ This in effect allows us to draw a line that snakes through each point in the space. When that line’s laid out it represents, through one to one correspondence between coordinate and index, a “count” line containing all points in every direction without having to index each. From this it follows that we can encode not only the indexed coordinates but the changes between these indices. Supposing that line is infinite, the collection represented by it is larger than the count of its members for the set of all subsets of that line is not a member of that line and therefore is in excess of it albeit constructed from its members. This collection provides all possible points in that universe and their distances which, if the count line extends two ways, this count must be raised to the power of the first series. This is equivalent to a series-successor which, if we take sets of sets of points in that line, by grouping them we get a count that is that line going two ways raised insofar as a subset that can be put into correspondence with each point on that line. This gives us an Ordinal categorization of this line with respect to its content. Ordinal-1 contains all sets of sets of points in the universe. To know however many groupings, i.e. formations (=shapes), there are, we move to the next ordinal, Ordinal-2, giving us how many inhabit the universe. If an entity in the universe can either have a property, exemplify a concept that determines or characterizes that property, or not, then all concepts that are necessarily possible are Ordinal-3, completing the system.²

Translating ordinals to worlds works in our system by considering ordinals as world-views (=models) of particular types. A higher order is a type of a type that contains, because built up from, its priors. As a type of arrangement that holds between members, we can talk of models of models via ordinal construction. This may seem hierarchical but is only such with respect to analysis. Within our system, we must think of this process as a nested procedure, worlds within worlds, a world of worlds constituting a universe. If of zero-type, we understand that this is the collection of all possible entities that can be arranged into a particular world. With zero able to be added to any arrangement without change, and as their basis of construction, the zero is both a part and apart from every possible construction. Ordinal-1 contains all possible worlds indexing a relation between members positing a world-model. Ordinal-2 represents a world of worlds, a model of worlds, which has the benefit of representing how one decodes a world in terms relevant to them and re-encodes it in a way that they

can represent their utilizing that model. Therefore, they're a member of the world indexed by that model for this relation entails that the former model has been embodied and then projected in subsequent contexts to test the extent to which one's reality can be captured utilizing those terms. (see Minsky) One's "self" is a model for how one navigates another model to explain their own world. In this way, that decoded model's limits with respect to organizing (=explaining) the experience of the receiver can be tested. Ordinal-3 is a world of world-models, a universe of world-models of worlds, a model of how world-models are related within the universe of possible world-views and encodes a system of world-models within possible worlds.

Notice that we have not left the world once, for the possibility to move up the chain is licensed by what's available in prior arrangements. Thus, if the zero of this chain represents all possible members from which a world can be built, then our first ordinal is a subset of all possible members, the second a subset of all possible possibilities, therefore containing the first, and so on. Containment of priors in what's articulated licenses an extension that refers or cites those antecedents as the input of a function articulating the necessary possibility of that output in the universe prior to that act. As necessarily possible, this does not mean a member of an arrangement to which we have access. The result of any operation is not necessarily known before but is a possibility by virtue of prior conditions, what's available, and can be considered necessarily possibly the case until actualized given certain conditions. For example, 2 always having been possible due to the constitutive rules of the universe of number yet only actualized given certain conditions, e.g. $1+1$. If another subset is started outside of this chain, then ontologically this necessary possibility would begin another chain within the universe from which worlds of higher order can be articulated; but epistemologically speaking, these models would be meaningless to us unless introduced to our chain and decoded in terms functionally-equivalent across lines, thereby making that chain an extension of our own. As such, this is a result of the same world making capacity within this universe, a necessary possibility within the domain in which that chain is constructed. It follows that the zero is both a member and apart from any one world in particular, unifying our system: $0=\text{all possible}$, $\{0\}=1$, $\{0, \{0\}\}=2$, etc.; $W=0$, $W\text{-successor}=W_1$, $W_1\text{-successor}=W_2$, etc. A fourth ordinal leads to nonsense, however, for that would assume a position outside of the universe of possible positions attainable with respect to others. That position's statements would be unable to be translated into another's world model, therefore, the extent to which it can be used remains undefined or contradictory.

Examples of this process abound. The Higgs boson was a necessary possibility within the standard model of physics, indirectly cited by all that we knew to be the case. But that particle's being the "Higgs" is conditional upon the frame in which the function of that term is determined. Improvisation in jazz or dance is a mode of expression operating over a domain in which all options within the world (=time and place) indexed by the song's current performance, that song being a finite yet open structure, are necessary possibilities although unheard until the right conditions arise, both compositionally and as a matter of the environment. Functional-equivalence allows for the content of phrases to be exchanged. The inner structure remains the same. The surface expression of that song, however, is a function of current conditions. When selected, these phrase's use have a determinate sense, representing an extension of the world and mood indexed by that song. Variation does not mean that we do not understand that the song being played is that song, yet the actualized version may be new to our ears. From these we find that a world is a model of a particular arrangement within a domain of necessary possibilities. If nothing is captured, we update the model, for insufficient within this world's affairs. If some thing is captured, then this model has actualized a future (=necessary possibility), presently—Amiri Baraka and Fred Moten discuss improvisational practice this way. Artist and scholar Rasheeda Philips of *Black Quantum Futurism* would state that in this way, "we meet the future everyday," allowing us to get out of the loop of a past met in the future that induces the need to evacuate the present of its content.

This surprising result not only brings together the idea that we can perform operations on this space from within, but that in this field its “infinite” interior can be counted as the collection of no one thing in particular. This proves fatal for the pessimist and the optimist mission to provide an alternative based on pessimist determinations. If a region is the case in so far as it is nothing, we can treat this determination conditionally as something given nothing, i.e. if “nothing” then something. Obvious questions abound but if we treat this seriously within our coordinate system, this conditional is considered by way of the distance traveled from point to point as one’s change in position on one axis with respect to a change in the other, i.e. exponentially. If a region X is treated insofar as it’s nothing then we can represent this as X^0 . However, in this interpretation, no one thing insofar as nothing produces everything. If 0 is nothing and 1 is all, X raised to a with respect to X raised to b is equal to X raised to $(a - b)$. If $a = b$ then we have X raised to a with respect to the same, thus X raised to 0. But X raised to a with respect to itself is 1, ergo our statement above. So, if conditionally if nothing then something given nothing, i.e. a region insofar as it’s empty, then if nothing is the case then something is an element of nothing given that condition.

This paradox is not up to us to solve for the above amounts to a collapse in not just the optimism/pessimism divide but the need for either. Pessimism would have to produce an object from 0-space to prove that it’s empty. However, if that space is indeed empty, there is no object that can be produced to prove that it is a vacuum. The determination of that space as null really proves that that determination as no thing is a part of this scheme and therefore everything follows. No one thing in particular means any thing is necessarily possible. For us, this shows why the null set is both a member of and in excess of any determination within this space. For if a function of determining that space is that space only when that space is at its zero, i.e. prior to projection, then any one object can satisfy that determination. In fact, the function itself becomes that object, making it the means of expressing the property of being in that space and, therefore, the function itself an object within that space. If occupying a point in space is a function of one’s coordinates (=location), functions as they apply to functions means that composition within this manifold dictates what is or is not possible and, therefore, necessary when regions interact, not what is found in the manifold itself irrespective of other positions. The content of worlds are their means of construction.

Models of the world and what is possible therein are constructed from other models, a loop that entails that the objects of the world and their determinations are constituted within this circuit, not outside of it. (Hall 1996) Hence, this is the world we have. (see Goodman, Minsky, and Moten) The function of composing worlds from worlds can be abstracted for given a model, if it’s that case that, if implied in that model is the function of its construction, therefore there is a function of construction, then we obtain that model given that function. (see Church) From this we see how we actualize an abstract object in the world we inhabit by virtue of the model we use to organize our experience. That function, given the definition above, is an object in the world given a model that when asked one can posit determinations regarding the world it encodes. A functional-equivalence can obtain between models despite the difference in the terms used given that very same definition. Recalling the way we laid out every possible point in a universe, which shouldn’t give us pause as Einstein gave a way of calculating its size, given sets A and B , from A to B means that A approximates B when an object in A and an object in B entails that a function of the first object produces the second object as output. Changes in the domain indexed by A model changes in B , determining the range of that function’s application, i.e. the extent that the concept (=abstract object) indexed by that function obtains when applied in subsequent conditions.

This does not mean that everything goes. Unrestricted exportation from models across all possible worlds, from determination to it necessarily being the case, does not hold. (see Kripke) Functions are abstracted from models to which we already have access and are decoded, always, in terms relevant to the receiver. (see Hall) This imposes a limit in which the significance of determinations have value. If universally applicable, the concept would be useless for one would not know where or when

to apply that concept and therefore never have use for it. The pronouncement that this is the best world does not necessitate its being so; neither does evacuating it of all significance! Even in fiction, the constituting rules of the story license certain statements that are true insofar as the story and those that are false, unless a fiction within that fiction is taken up which is not contradictory to its own rules and not conflated with the story itself. Notice our quantificational puzzle above as it pertains to modality. “For all there exists” determinations lead to a pronouncement of existence outside of the story.

What’s the significance? If world-views (=models) have a shape (=outline) then they have content (=volume). We can speak of the (surface) area they circumscribe in space-time as the relation drawn between their coordinates, intervals between instances indicating their movement. Their content is a function of the intensity of activity within that space, providing an indirect measure of the possible activity therein. As such, significance is the ratio of that area given that content. If a world indexes a particular relation in space and time, we can conceive of space itself as an elastic, flat, surface that when a formation is placed on that surface, it sinks into that space in proportion to its significance, slowly wrapped by that sheet, enveloped in space. Yet prior to sinking we can trace that form’s shape on that surface. Relative to other formations, the different parts of the surface of the formation itself is covered at different rates. It is, therefore, angled, the difference between the rate at which the form sinks and the portions of it that are covered provides a theory of the moment of that formation; the angle of that moment generates spin, i.e. distinguishes how we see it or the rate at which its various aspects are revealed relative to us. Resultingly, the shape of the space around it forces the formation to move. A formation’s inertia gives way to its mass, a measure of its significance within that space. As such we can look at its significance relative to other formations as the difference between one formation and either another formation or the space indirectly defined as the converse of that shape. This indirect measure of space provides the shape of the institutions or conditions that license or bar the expressions constituting the shape of the form of life under study, therefore, space is not empty.

Changes in shape, then, record the significance of an event. This mutually constituted system explains how institutions, composed by a relation between formations, tell those formations how to move, corresponding to our definition of moment(um) above. Socio-culturally and politically, consider the Black Lives Matter movement. One that is claimed by its founders as being defined by way of its distributed content, as a network, a global movement. The breadth of distribution gives us the surface area while its depth is understood by way of the amount of actions at each node. In some instances, we can have a formation with minimum surface area and maximum volume. A black hole is defined as having an infinite negative radius, so when taking the area and volume ratio they cast a shadow of the light bent around them. Light falls in but, from our view, never truly reach the surface of the black hole. (see S. Haco, S. Hawking, M. Perry, A. Strominger) Black holes compare with cynicism and nihilism. If information is the measure of the reduction of possible interpretations, certainty (=absolutism) produces no information, therefore information, considered by way of the knowledge it affords, is coupled with, means that cynicism destroys meaning. This corrosive pessimism leads to a state explored by Gilroy’s discussion of melancholia. However, in the model above, we have shown that some information remains, even for Black holes.

To say that this is the best world we would have to step outside the means of constructing that statement which would be impossible. We would rely on those same means to make that stipulation or make a non-worldly world statement from which anything goes due to unrestricted exportation. The age-old adage to step outside one’s mind to speak of the contents of their mind, or to look at one’s eye to see it seeing, has negative repercussions, e.g. “to be outside your mind.” Giving up the argument between optimism and pessimism, we realize that we have and only have means to construct worlds in which claims about it can be made and held accountable by those means we know to be the case, evidenced by having the ability to make a statement at all. Leibniz’s argument leads to an induction problem for from the perfect we introduced in its successor something that does not have access to that origin, otherwise it would be that origin, thus being a subset of the perfect, so not

perfect itself. This means that from a position in the future, where perfect begets perfect, with pessimism being the point at which we determine a subset of the perfect and optimism a reclamation of that origin, both can be viewed as concurrent propositions from a future position. Gilroy warns of this reclamation of origin and the myths that ensue to legitimize tactics to get back there. We, by our definitions, are the corrosion of this state because, created from the perfect, are the horizon of possibility to articulate what are necessary proposals from what's been licensed, i.e. made possible, from priors. Doesn't sound so pessimistic anymore. A retroactive distinction to characterize an origin to dictate the future is the problem. Pessimism and optimism are paraconsistent from some future position, explaining the evolution from one to the other as melancholia, a longing for something that's never been, or to which one has never had access.

The above amounts to there's no need for a transcendent stipulation, one which inevitably leads to collapse from a non-worldly world determination. Consider a series of world statements. If a statement within that system is not provable in that system, i.e. "this is the best world," for viewed in total, then we can assume that the possibility to form that statement indirectly follows the constituting rules of that system and hence can be added to that system creating a world-successor. The ability to form it implies that it must be consistent with some arrangement of statements but because about the system overall, cannot be proven for all of them. We go on to say that the new system is a subsystem of the current one, for abstracted from some combination of statements therein. Otherwise, the world-successor is not a part of the overall world-system. It follows that alternatives can also be constructed by combinations of these subsets of statements which are not themselves members of the original system but formed of its members and thus licensed by virtue of that which they follow indirectly. These poetic computations follow from associative thinking, a poetic apparatus detailed by Moten.

From this we can provide a formal definition for how these possibilities are necessarily possible within the original set of statements. If a concept (=view) indexes a possible bundle of statements capturing a set of experience, i.e. a possible world, then that set determines the state of affairs of a possible arrangement (=world-view-model) within the system of all possible statements; if a world asserts that for all that is that bundle, that bundle is possible, then it is the case that there is no subset of statements in the overall system from which that bundle was abstracted that asserts the negation of that possible world, i.e. some statement in that system asserts that possibility's antithesis. It follows that each bundle, although a subset of statements in that system, represents an extension of that system because made of a particular arrangement of its components and, thereby, considered real. Multiple subsets can be considered individually and combined (=associated) in accord with this same process. They are not interchangeable, yet not mutually exclusive with respect to the system wherein selection of one does not bar the possibility of the other. We can treat the system as having had these possibilities indexed by these views prior to abstraction, actualized given the model used to analyze the system. The world-view represented by that subsystem and in which that encoded concept's function, the best world for it, can be determined by this procedure. We can then articulate an instance of this necessary possibility as an extension of the world we know to be the case, one that was always there, as yet articulate. This procedure is an articulation of necessary possibility, articulation in lieu of necessitation. By completing this process, we do away with a transcendent non-worldly world origin, for the arrangement made and encoded is an extension of this world and, in so doing, we've added to the material to articulate subsequent alternatives, changing the world for future iterations. Transcendence is boring, so is the point where pessimism sets in following optimism or, conversely, in reaction to that foreclosure of possibility.³

Talk of movements possible and actualized in spatial terms allows us to formalize how to construct possible worlds from what is given, thus making these virtual possibilities necessarily possible because embedded in the domain as alternatives that can be articulated by arranging the relations between members in different ways. There's no need for an "origin" in this framework although we understand there was an emergence given certain conditions. Origin becomes the point marking

the event where terms break down exactly where the function of the origin is the origin, a fixed point.⁴ That point is where the function instantiates the zero of the series it produces, what determines what counts as a member of that series prior to its application. One would have to step outside the very means by which what follows is licensed for want to claim an origin. Coupling it with an instance leads to demise, and they must resort to an axis which is the tangent of one of these coordinates but no longer inside the resultant formation. This axis is imaginary, yet that origin's related as the inverse root/route moving up and back at each point selected as an origin in space. Thus, there is no one point in particular from inside a formation by which "origins" are absolute. Articulation shows how imagination can be real but only from what is necessarily possible given enabling conditions. Origins instantiate a process but are not interchangeable with each instance that follows as the input for the next step is the output from prior.

Given determinations are relative to one's position with respect to the formations of which they are member, optimism and pessimism appear at the same time globally and then annihilate each other again and again. However, when considered in relation to other formations, when making those determinations they split, contouring the space allowing us to move, not orientated towards one camp or the other, but oriented in the space their intervals constitute. As relations begin to form we must say that different possible arrangements exist simultaneously before they settle into either formation. Considering movements composed of various components as vectors, as having direction and magnitude, i.e. subregions within that space, then the convergence of these formations within which it can be said that they cover the same phenomenon or concept is the sum of the pairing of each aspect. It follows that to highlight one of these components in relation to others makes that determination relative to the position of the observer in these joint affairs. The determination is yes/no given the frame used but each component must be necessarily and equally possible prior to determination. Otherwise, no aspect of either vector or their convergence could be determined. Focus on aspects decreases our capacity to track movement; focus on movement decreases our capacity to determine the interaction between components reproducing that vector over a distance, i.e. some interval.⁵ Focus on one instance of Black Lives Matter makes it impossible to see the same movement operating under a different name elsewhere. Each formation can enact nonlocal effects on the other prior to our determining what the probable outcome of this convergence might be. Any crystallization of a new form is one out of a finite yet open number of possibilities.⁶

Since the significance of a connection between points can be considered relative to the inverse growth of the distance between them, this line can be considered possible even when we have not selected two or more points. Focus on lines instead of points means relations, akin to functions, can be treated as objects and we find that we are looking at points in space as being charged, like repelling like and opposites attracting, propelling one's movement along some vector as local polarity changes, thereby stretching space. A model of what is measured as "polarization" in socio-cultural and political affairs between and within regions in that space is possible, with polarity only conceived in relation to each other through their operations, i.e. how they function in that space. Ising models have been used to this effect, where polarization describes changes in charge, given interactions with neighbors, different shapes form as a function of the "temperature" of their environment. Based upon our selections, a change in lines drawn relative to what's available allows for a wave like measure to appear within the field constituted by a movement between points. Instead of points, in focusing on the lines between them, interaction now means that as lines are composed, they push the direction of others by this inverse (=reverse image) relation. The boundary of the formation oscillates, constantly changing the space, i.e., distance between selected coordinates in the process of composing formations in the field.

To move from this model to the structuring of experience we must reduce movement to a determinate distance. As a formation in this space is projected towards the movement of another the imagined result is the reverse image of that projection angled in another direction resulting from

their interaction. This can be triangulated as the root/route of their square distances measured towards that point of interaction. The significance of interaction is the decrease in the projected angular movement towards a region i.e. orthogonally or back and in a different direction, to which another formation lies, hence the triangulation. This unifies Glissant's theory of relation with our material reading of the continuous movement of various formations as vectors of different amplitudes, i.e. significance, linked to the probability of being actualized within a frame. Of course, as movement is continuous, whether a formation becomes an object within a particular framing of space constitutes a reduction to the probability of being captured in the model, causing jumps. For to "measure" or observe some formation's position is done with respect to a frame; if considered a function of its movement with respect to others, this motion is continuous and what is registered at a point is the amplitude at that point. So if that movement doesn't register given some measure, it doesn't mean it's not there, but is at an intensity that doesn't register given our frame. Something's never register and therefore are unreal to us. Different amplitudes register at other points, but if measured at another position, the probability of registering is equal at each position until a frame's applied. That entity is at both positions until measured, but when measured that relation's lost. Physically, this is called functional collapse, here modal collapse. Projection into this new region can be consider by way of a set of possible yes/no options where the probability to be actualized is a function of which obtains given the frame. Hence, that vector's reduction to probable frame, i.e. the collapse. Collapse entails that a determination of this being the best of all possible worlds is equal to all other options, thus the conclusion that given this is the only world we have, making alternatives is what we got. Optimism and pessimism are arbitrary distinctions save for retroactive determinations.

The energy within a system of relations between different forms as a function of their frequency of interaction is itself a function of the momentum with which these formations travel. This is ascertained from the force of impact derived by change in shape, indicating a change in the distances between the constitutive points of that formation upon interaction with others. Resultingly, there is a conversion between energy and the shape of these formations proportional to the maximum observable motion in the overall system. This is ascertained by way of the frequency of interaction/contact with others over some distance/interval.

So far, we have considered the best of all possible world argument in the following way. If this is the best world, then it's necessarily the best where the necessity of the best world means that this is the world we must inhabit. However, this determination is contingently necessary; its necessity cannot be proven for this determination is embedded in a conditional statement whose license references a system which allows for universal statements that can be vacuously true. So, although this statement is deterministic, it requires an external stance to the world which cannot be attained. We are the current world's inhabitants and if we leave to make that statement, that world would be necessarily empty. As such, this statement cannot be universalized across all possible worlds for this is assumed to be the only world and therefore admits of the necessary possibility of better alternatives. However, this is not a dismal situation, for what is constructed as a necessary possibility from this world represents an extension of this world that is real given the frame utilized. So it's the conditions in which these possibilities can be actualized which is the true object of this statement, not any one thing in the world which must be the case eternally. Thus, the best world is indistinguishable from this one for constituted by different arrangements from the components of this world, indexing what statements do or do not apply as a function of these formations and their relation to others.

As such, optimism and pessimism can be considered through functional composition. If pessimism corrodes relations between frameworks projected to organize our experience, its output becomes input for optimism, not as a thing labeled such but as a function whose output is relevant to both domains. Optimism and Pessimism's output are functionally-equivalent, which implies that the distinction between those domains was only retroactively made, although across domains their output operate in similar ways in response to the conditions they produce. It is not about which

program to follow but what we're doing. Treating movement(s) as physical entities, as real, we quickly see a paradox that arises in a conception that may seem to lead to pessimism with respect to the failure of a particular condition obtaining here, now. The idea that one can change the world before changing one's self implies that one can occupy a position outside, therefore not of, that world. We have shown how transcendent arguments lead to collapse. To do this, one must abstract, then externalize that version of themselves to act as they're apart from the world they wish to change, to universalize that change. In most cases, the frame represents what is contrary to what is the case on the ground, for how would they know since they've left. The version they've constructed is from the past and assumed to model future conditions. This leads to an inevitable problem, for one cannot get out of their own way, get over themselves, in order to change the world they've mapped. Their map reduplicates issues of self in the world-image constructed and utilized to organize the affairs of those it captures, eschewing accountability for that creation because one can just defer to that image when the effects are not those desired while assuming a self constituted via the negation of others. (Robinson 39-71) That world-image is only useful insofar as it can be decoded by others in terms relevant to them and when projected the objects of experience captured by that re-encoded frame obtain a functional-equivalence with those captured by the encoder. The basis for construction is an intersubjective network in which determinations over the operation of objects can be made. (see Hempel)

The effort to stipulate that this is the best world from an external stance, without participation in that world, reveals why some practices canonize a question rather than construct and present alternatives that can be tested and revised by others. To cultivate a supposed mastery over a stipulation that generates more and more questions requiring the same mastery to solve means there's no system of validation save the identity of the question itself. There is no one object that can be generated from this inquiry save the question itself. The question bars others from modeling the conditions that proposed this question in the first place. Those in the world must defer to the expert that posed it and who "owns" the means of determining what is allowed in the domain or field it defines. (see Martin and Rustin) There's profit to be had in such a set up. It feels better to identify what is wrong rather than compose an alternative.

If this is the best possible world, then we must conceive of the world as a whole, which is something that is conceived prior to its formation. This entails that the process of its formation can never get off the ground for it is already preconceived, causing us to long for an object that has never been formed. This utopic version of the world leads to melancholia for it can never be satisfied. But why ask if this is the best of all possible worlds? It's a dubious question because we would have to step out of that world's evolution, thus outside of the world, to talk about a world already constituted which is, in point of fact, an unworldly determination, one made outside of the world in which that determination would be relevant or significant. This fact necessitates that we must make and remake a world from old versions, again and again, making "the best world" question senseless in some ways, albeit an exercise that reveals much about our current predicament.

Above, we made sense of world-making and its limits by re-encoding what is given to terms relevant to the form (of life) to which those means were introduced, revealing what Amiri Baraka said so long ago, that improvisation is praxis. The constituting rules of world-making composes expressions of forms of life not experienced prior to this moment. However, because fashioned from terms whose functional-content obtain some model linking conditions to successive contexts of assertion, in combination, they are now immediately valid in virtue of those principles, although in excess of what was previously codified. Why hadn't Lazarus been left to reside in paradise? For the world beyond is to be made here and now. A necessarily possible future, actualized presently. Why did Thomas doubt? To question orthodoxy by the terms of their construction.

To question begets a form of life, a pursuit; not a rule of life, one whose rules are followed blindly, made out to be universal, eternal. Forged outside of the world they're, most likely, inappropriate when applied for vacuously true. We would not know the worldly condition in which they do or do

not apply, because made up of terms appropriate to the time and when universalized into the future, cannot account for current conditions. They're fixed in reference to a time long gone. Even if the perfect world would show up, we wouldn't be able to recognize it based on our measure of what it means to be the best of all possible worlds; one abstracted from unworldly conditions. "This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because any course of action can be made out to accord with the rule." (R. Jones 145–149, 160–162; Wittgenstein 185, 201a) As such, this return to an inner creative capacity, to question conditions by experimenting with necessity, allows one to reveal more of what could be the case prior to what's been actualized. World building and model building go hand in hand for questions about the world can be answered utilizing that model in a way that can be tried and tested by others. The model of that model places us within that world and reveals the process by which pessimism may corrode an opening for compositional operations to gain material to make for better approximations of the as yet, and include us in the process.

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Notes

- ¹ This deserves explicit detail. The integers $Z = 0, \pm 1, \pm 2, \dots$ can be defined in terms of the natural numbers $N = 1, 2, 3, \dots$ as equivalence classes of pairs (coordinates in a plane) where natural's (m, n) are equal to $(m - \text{successor}, n - \text{successor})$ if and only if $m + n - \text{successor} = m - \text{successor} + n$ and where we think of (m, n) as $m - n$. This provides a snaking through all points in a plane where coordinates are encodings of the abstract object that is the concept of an integer characterizing the property of a count, i.e. induction and recursion. Enumerating these entities by way of their function, functions considered objects by the definition above, these entities are very much so a member of this space albeit not a thing, a necessary possibility for determining what that space is at all.
- ² There is an argument that if we only counted Borel sets, the union of open ($<$ relation) and closed (complement to open) sets, then if there are only ordinal-2 many regions in the universe then there are only ordinal-1 many Borel-regions. This means only ordinal-2 many concepts.
- ³ This process is a reconsideration of a technique developed by Paul Cohen called forcing (1963, pp. 1143–1148). Anticipating some backlash against this term used in this context, for it lends itself to notions of coercion in the field of cultural studies, we opt to articulate (a possible) arrangement which was not currently a member and yet because composed of them represents a real extension of the domain under consideration. Thus, constructing means to access alternatives that were virtually possible all along is what is meant here.
- ⁴ A fixed point can be formalized but invites a notion of self-reflexivity which can only be defined by way of a formal notion of substitution. Consider the instance when the function of an object's mode of expression given certain conditions is that object, i.e. indexes those conditions as the initial context of its instantiation. Thus, that object possesses a property that proves some statement about those conditions. Now consider a framework or system proves that statement if and only if there is an encoding of that statement in that system that possesses that provable property. For this we need a function of substitution such that with that function, an object with that property and a symbol are input and produces an encoding of that symbol possessing that property. To show this, consider a function of an object such that we can substitute that object with a symbol in such a way that that operation possesses a property relevant in the current system. Now consider that symbol is an encoding of that function. We need to show that a statement identifies the function of that symbol if and only if to possess that property we can substitute that symbol for that symbol. Well, if that symbol encodes the function of that symbol, substitute that symbol for a symbol means we have

an encoding of the function of that symbol which also means that we have an encoding of that statement by definition thus the statement identifies an encoding of itself as having a property relevant to the system. Effectively we have formalized an encoding/decoding mechanism wherein a relation between features of a world are encoded in terms relevant to that individual and when projected capture a world-image that when communicated to other's is decoded in terms relevant to them and when asking the former questions about the world via that image, the former utilizes this image to form explanations and the latter ascertains the extent to which a functional-equivalence between objects that obtain the corresponding images of each individual obtain. As such, this notion is formalizable but incomplete when making a universal statement about a formation following some point of origin from within that formation for the set of points of origin are recursively enumerable but not all points are recursive, i.e. lead to the formation we expect. We have shown a recursively enumerable procedure for manipulating infinities in our proof of a non-empty space and here for determining "origins", however, an origin is not recursive in itself, which seems to fly against our intuitions for an origin is iterative in the sense that it produces what follows and yet origins do not iterate themselves for the input for the next iteration is a function of prior output.

- ⁵ Consider vectors V_1 and V_2 , each having component A,B,C and D,E,F respectively. Then the event of their convergence composes another vector whose components are correlations of the activity of the former two, thus $V_3 = -V_1 V_2 + AD + BE + CF$ where an observation on one of the vectors going into that interaction will effect the other for V_1 considered in relation to V_2 alters AD,BE,CF, V_3 in relation to V_2 as well.

Now consider a "state jump" in the state of affairs where V_1 becomes V_2 . This is a jump for consideration of whether the change has taken place is a yes/no function of the framing of the situation even though underlying this event is a continuous process, thus evolution itself is not continuous for what is highlighted as being relevant to conditions is yes/no but the capacity to be otherwise means that all possible changes are present in that vector prior to determination. If V_1 is headed in a particular direction then V_2 is one of two or more expressions of V_1 , composed of an arrangement of its subcomponents which is not a component itself but a combination that is constructed from those components therefore virtually the case before hand and actualized given certain conditions, that is "orthogonal" to, i.e. vertical determinations upon a point in, that line for if V_1 is the sum of components that are subsets of that line the distance traveled along that lines evolution makes an observation anywhere on that line a radical determination, i.e. the root of the squared differences between points on that line marking each subset. Up until that determination, we are in the process of V_1 's evolution in the direction of V_2 and immediately after is one of the necessarily possible alternatives determinable by that observation, each of which must be the case, simultaneously, until the determination is made. Nonlocal action provides a model for articulation theory, how these concepts emerge not what thing to which they attach, for conditions focus means a relation between local action and global changes, individually complex yet collective simple given the conditions, is possible. An act in another region changes global conditions such that what emerges in another does not have a direct causal link to that prior act for not in its purview and yet that act was a factor in changing conditions so that that possibility can be/was actualized.

- ⁶ Consider a plane where different lines are converging all at once based on a defined parameter on modes of interaction with their neighbors, the possible shapes that come to fruition all were the case prior to the form settled on based on these determinations in such a way that points in one region indirectly effect those to which there is no determinable connection, yet, thus exist simultaneously until given a certain condition a definite shape emerged which is either that shape or not once that framing is used.

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Footprints, Movement, and ‘the Road We’re Already On’: From *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) to *Oryx and Crake* (2003)

AVRIL TYNAN

Abstract: In Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the protagonist’s discovery of a single footprint on the beach of the island where he has been marooned for fifteen years is one of literature’s most iconic scenes. Remarkable at once for its alterity and its singularity, the footprint refuses to take up position in a series that might help to identify either the origin or the destination of its maker. In Margaret Atwood’s post-apocalyptic novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the protagonist’s discovery of a trail of (human) footprints liberates the footprint as a trace of erstwhile existence and suggests the movement of what Tim Ingold terms human ‘becoming’. Yet the ambiguity of the novel’s conclusion draws an ambivalent reading of the path laid out by these footprints, which may not lead us towards moral and epistemological advance but rather to social and environmental catastrophe.

Keywords: Daniel Defoe, Margaret Atwood, Tim Ingold, post-apocalyptic fiction, speculative fiction

The footprint

In Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the protagonist’s discovery of a single footprint on the beach of the island where he has been marooned for fifteen years is one of literature’s most iconic scenes:

It happen’d one Day about Noon going towards my Boat, I was exceedingly surpriz’d, with the Print of a Man’s naked Foot on the Shore, which was very plain to be seen in the Sand: I stood like one Thunder-struck, or as if I had seen an Apparition; I listen’d, I look’d round me, I could hear nothing, nor see any Thing; I went up to a rising Ground to look farther; I went up the Shore and down the Shore, but it was all one, I could see no other Impression but that one. I went to it again to see if there were any more, and to observe if it might not be my Fancy; but there was no Room for that, for there was exactly the very Print of a Foot, Toes, Heel, and every Part of a Foot; how it came thither, I knew not, nor could in the least imagine. (Defoe 1975, 121)

Shattering his sense of safety and peaceful isolation, Crusoe decides that the footprint, which is too big to be his own, must be the mark of the Devil or of a savage, although further tangible traces of the latter he finds only two years later, and the narrative leaves open the conclusion of any definitive attribution (see Brown 2012, 147–180).

As the template for a host of castaway and post-apocalyptic narratives, the influence of *Robinson Crusoe* on literary production is not negligible. Christopher Palmer, in *Castaway Tales: From Robinson Crusoe to Life of Pi* (2016), discusses parodic revisions of the castaway trope in, for example, A. D. Hope’s poem “Man Friday” (1985), Michel Tournier’s *Friday, or, The Other Island* (1967), Jules Verne’s *The Mysterious Island* (1875), Alex Garland’s *The Beach* (1996), and Terry Pratchett’s *Nation* (2009). Heather J. Hicks identifies the protagonist’s attempts to remake civilization (albeit through a colonial lens and desire) in Defoe’s novel as the precursor to post-apocalyptic novels that centre not only natural disaster but also man-made and biochemical catastrophe, including Cormac McCarthy’s

The Road (2006) and Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007). One of the works featured in Hicks' analysis of post-apocalyptic fiction is Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the first in the Canadian author's *MaddAdam* Trilogy, which recounts not only the post-apocalyptic survival of a handful of human and posthuman subjects but also, through flashbacks, the lengthy apocalyptic trajectory of genetic engineering and biomedical interference. Yet it is the iconic scene of the footprint's discovery in *Robinson Crusoe* as it is reimagined in *Oryx and Crake* that is of particular interest in this article. If the discovery of the footprint in *Robinson Crusoe* is peppered with incomprehension and a persistent lack of knowledge as to the ontological cause of the print, in *Oryx and Crake* a corresponding trail of footprints suggests a more ambivalent relationship to knowledge and progress, in which the trajectory of human life is left suspended in the novel's conclusion.

Drawing on Tim Ingold's explorations of lines, traces, and footprints, I argue that *Oryx and Crake* stages a mediation of the human being in active evolution. If Defoe's depiction of the unattributed footprint at the centre of *Robinson Crusoe* instigated the protagonist's disarray in part because of its singularity and the "obscurity of its origins," refusing to fit "into a series of prints, coming before or after another" from which could be traced an identity or source (Brown 2012, 163), the trail of prints in *Oryx and Crake* illustrates the work in progress of human evolution, eluding a beginning or end but instead a constant adaptive movement through which knowledge is acquired. The shift from the orientation towards the past in Crusoe's attempts to attribute origin to the print, and the potentially redemptive future orientation of the discovery of human footprints in *Oryx and Crake* liberates the footprint as a trace from ideas of erstwhile existence to instigate new thinking around the movement of human "becoming" (Ingold 2011, 72; 2013, 8). Yet the ambiguity of the novel's conclusion inflects the reader's interpretation of these prints. The action of following in the footsteps of another gestures to the endless circulation of knowledge between subjects, but the assumption that presupposes all knowledge as beneficial can be overstated. In the constant evolutionary movements of human becomings, activity often leads not to progress but to catastrophe, a warning parodied in Atwood's twenty-first-century iteration of social tragedy.

Traces and paths

In *Lines: A Brief History*, social anthropologist Tim Ingold distinguishes between what he considers to be the two main types of line: the thread and the trace (2007, 41–44). While the thread is a three-dimensional, textured filament that can be entangled or knotted with other threads or suspended between two points, the trace *endures*, marked *upon* a surface rather than having a surface of its own. He further distinguishes between two types of trace: the additive and the reductive. If the traces left by writing are additive, in that they overlay the existing surface with a new one, the traces left by the movements of animals and humans are, for the most part, reductive, in that they imprint the surface of the world, leaving an impression that corresponds to existence. Among the trails and tracks of humans and animals, Ingold elaborates, in "Footprints Through the Weather-world: Walking, Breathing, Knowing," on the footprint as a reductive trace of the ways in which human beings become knowledgeable (2010). While he acknowledges the slipperiness of this taxonomy, and the relative ease with which traces may transform into threads and threads into traces, he proposes that it is according to these transformations that the surfaces of our world come into, and fall out of, being.

It is this entangled, symbiotic development of both the human being and their surroundings that contributes to Ingold's further development of life as a meshwork of living beings, themselves composed as a knot of interwoven lines (see 2011, 63–94; 2015, 3–8 and 13–17; 2016). Yet the reductive trace is of particular interest here for the ways in which it intersects with the world, depicting a mark of the movements that embed the human body into the earth's surfaces. As Ingold argues, human beings do not perceive their environment through sight, sound, or touch alone but "with the whole body," and "it is surely through our feet, in contact with the ground (albeit mediated by footwear), that we are most fundamentally and continually 'in touch' with our surroundings" (2011, 45). Through

our feet, and the prints they make upon the surface of the world, Ingold insists on movement as critical to evolution, which does not simplistically describe the ascension of a species from primitive to ideal, as if a final blueprint were realised at some point in history (all environmental and contextual conditions being favourable) but as an ongoing and endless “life process” (2013, 6). “Wherever there is life there is movement,” he writes, but it is a movement of “renewal along a path” that is a generative motion of “becoming rather than being” (Ingold 2011, 72). Human beings – or indeed any beings, human or non-human – may therefore be more accurately described as human *becomings*, “that is, not as discrete and pre-formed entities but as trajectories of movement and growth” (Ingold 2013, 8). Human becomings forge paths along which they continually travel and which others may follow along too, creating a “work in progress” (Ingold 2013, 8) that is never finished. This view of evolution, which “*grounds* human beings within the continuum of life” (Ingold 2011, 49–50 emphasis in original), also emphasises the role of the foot and the print it makes as a sign of the interaction between the world and the human becoming.

In this evolutionary movement, it is the journey, rather than the destination, that is important. Distinguishing between transport and wayfaring, Ingold argues that transport, an increasingly mechanised form of transfer between two points, is concerned with the locations of departure and destination and the conclusion of a passage between the two in the quickest time possible. Wayfaring, on the other hand, “has no beginning or end” (Ingold 2007, 81):

The wayfarer is a being who, in following a path of life, negotiates or improvises a passage as he goes *along*. In his movement as in life, his concern is to seek a way through: not to reach a specific destination or terminus but to keep on going. Though he may pause to rest, even returning repeatedly and circuitously to the same place to do so, every period of rest punctuates an ongoing movement. For wherever he is, and so long as life goes on, there is somewhere further he can go. Along the way, events take place, observations are made, and life unfolds. (Ingold 2010, 126 emphasis in original)

Wayfaring, Ingold proposes, is a means of acquiring understanding and knowledge of the world and of the self through unending interaction between the two. “Moving is knowing,” writes Ingold, and the wayfarer acquires knowledge as he goes: “Proceeding on his way, his life unfolds: he grows older and wiser. Thus the growth of his knowledge is equivalent to the maturation of his own person, and like the latter it continues throughout life” (2010, 134 emphasis in original). The footprint is thus a reductive trace of the wayfarer’s passage *through* the world, a typically ephemeral impression left behind by the movements of both body and ground. Footprints are a trace of the interactions between the human being and the world in which they make their passage, a mark not only of the human being’s impression upon the world, but of the ways in which the world informs the passage of human beings.

These mediations on the footprint as a reductive trace of evolutionary movements and of the actions of human becomings, that is, the human being reconsidered in terms “not of what they *are*, but of what they *do*” (Ingold 2013, 8 emphasis in original), create a jarring rift in the analysis of *Robinson Crusoe*. The singular print and the protagonist’s concerns with its maker stall examination of activity or movement and interrupt a consideration of evolutionary understanding and progress. Indeed, Crusoe’s discovery of a single print in the sand complicates the notion of the footprint as a trace of the wayfarer’s meandering path that weaves together life and knowledge without end. The singularity of this print, its lack of origins, and its impression as a reminder that the protagonist is not alone echo the colonial overtones of the novel. As an iconic literary scene of man’s confrontation with the Other, the footprint has become what Maximillian E. Novak describes as, “a symbol of the real and of human presence, but most importantly, it has become a symbol of reaction to otherness, to the strange feeling of anxiety and even hostility we feel toward what is alien to us” (2014, 102). Crusoe, who has crafted for himself a replica of agricultural England on the territory of an exotic island, finds himself in disarray at the knowledge that Others may exist in competition for his land. In its remarkable singularity, the print in *Robinson Crusoe* resonates more with authorial artistic

license than with any correlation to reason: one footprint, perfectly preserved, even days later when Crusoe returns to measure his own foot against the one in the sand, has no grounding in logic. The illegibility of this single print without accompanying traces leaves the protagonist – and the reader – in a state of discombobulation.

Ingold reminds us that a footprint is a multidirectional indexical sign of cause and effect, “yielding information about a creature that has gone before, and a direction to follow” (2022, 339). Yet Crusoe’s footprint, which has no further marks of a trail preceding or following from it, is a sign of inertia rather than movement. Illogically singular, Crusoe cannot establish a causal link yielding information of the past, nor can he infer a future direction to follow. It is precisely the print’s “insubstantiality” as a minimal conservative trace of human existence that ignites the imagination and the horror of uncertainty just as much as, or perhaps more than, any physical evidence ever could (Tillyard 1969, 69). Rather than forming a path to follow, the “haunting trace of an other [...] has the effect of closing down Crusoe’s sense of future” (Curkpatrick 2002, 248–249; see also Palmer 2016, 4). Crusoe’s imaginings travel to the desire to establish the “being” of the print, the need to identify who or what caused the impression rather than concern himself with mediations of what the print’s maker may have been doing at that time. In this respect, the singular print is reminiscent more of Ingold’s stamp (2010, 129), an impression imposed from above with a permanency and intention that the meandering wayfarer’s prints cannot replicate:

Whereas the stamp connotes immobility and omnipresence, footprints register emplaced movement. Far from staking a claim, the indigenous inhabitant leaves footprints in the ground as clues to his whereabouts and intentions, and for others to follow. While a trained eye and touch can read much from a single footprint, even more can be read from a series of prints. (2010, 129)

If movement is not, as Ingold argues, ancillary to knowing but is synchronic with the process of becoming knowledgeable, then the immobility of this print and the fleeting potential for interaction and understanding parody the colonial oppression Crusoe delivered upon this island. Its reluctance to yield information relating to its origins, activities, or intentions, or even seemingly to be altered by the elements is channelled through the eyes of the colonial subject, who views the print of the Other as a mark of his infinite alterity.

Yet the print, reduced to a signifier that erases racial difference, is also a reminder of the arbitrariness of the binaries between self and Other or civilized and savage (McCarty 2021). Persuaded that the print must be his own, Crusoe returns to the site of the unidentified print three days later to measure it against his own foot. Realising that the print is not in a location corresponding to his own disembarkation on the island, and that it is far larger than his own, Crusoe nonetheless demonstrates the enduring similarities between self and Other. For Dianne Armstrong, the footprint is a reminder of the commonalities Crusoe shares with other men like himself. In the encounter with the footprint, Armstrong argues, the reader witnesses “Crusoe’s unfolding recognition that he is implicated in mankind’s crimes against humanity, his awareness that he is not an egocentric or exceptional existence but one joined in empathy to the human community” (1992, 218). Although Crusoe dismissively conflates the print’s alterity with savagery, for Armstrong and for McCarty, it is not the appearance of otherness that so frightens Crusoe, but the glaring knowledge of enduring similarity between human beings.

The path that is created in *Robinson Crusoe* does not connote directionality and movement but, in stamping his foot into the ground alongside the existing print, Crusoe indicates inertia, insularity, and repetition. Yet, if it is the lack of accompanying footprints that unravel the possibility for a reading of human becoming in *Robinson Crusoe*, the re-envisioning of the castaway’s encounter with prints in the sand, several centuries later, in Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, hardly vindicates the quest for progress. On the contrary, in this later revision, the trail of footprints has apocalyptic implications. In the post-apocalyptic wasteland of *Oryx and Crake*, the action of following in the

footprints of another opens up an ambivalence towards the human 'work in progress' that may be inflected with redemption or regression.

Continuing down the road we're already on

Oryx and Crake, published in 2003, is the first novel in what became Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, followed by *The Year of the Flood* in 2009 and *MaddAddam* in 2013. Unlike some of Atwood's other works, and particularly the now infamous *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), *Oryx and Crake* is concerned less with themes of feminism and post-feminism and more with themes of humanism and posthumanism, and the effects of unchecked scientific advancement and environmental damage and misuse.¹ The novel itself is split over two different future timeframes. The first is a near-future, characterised by the determined concentration of scientific advances that are not unknown to us today, and the second is a more distant post-apocalyptic future. The novel opens after the apocalypse, where the protagonist, Snowman, is seemingly the sole human survivor of a viral plague that has wiped out humanity.² As the novel continues along its two temporal frames, we discover that Snowman used to be Jimmy, and that the apocalypse was the planned outcome of a biomedical disaster designed by his erstwhile best friend and scientific genius Crake, who used to be Glenn.

From the post-apocalyptic future, the reader discovers anachronistically that Crake developed a pill – named euphemistically the BlyssPluss pill – ostensibly designed to protect the user against all sexually transmitted diseases, to improve libido and a sense of well-being, and to prolong youth (Atwood 2013, 346). The Pill is part of a broader research project on immortality, designed to function by eliminating "the external causes of death [...]. War, which is to say misplaced sexual energy [...]. Contagious diseases, especially sexually transmitted ones. Overpopulation, leading [...] to environmental degradation and poor nutrition" (345). It has a subversive side effect, however, that is never publicly disclosed: the pill is also engineered to sterilise the user – against his or her knowledge – in order to fulfil Crake's apparently altruistic plan to limit the number of human beings on Earth and thus reduce the growing pressure on natural resources. As he explains, the human race is perched on the edge of a "sink or swim" catastrophe:

Such a pill, he said, would confer large-scale benefits, not only on individual users [...] but on society as a whole; and not only on society, but on the planet. [...] There was no downside at all. [...] As a species we're in deep trouble, worse than anyone's saying. They're afraid to release the stats because people might just give up, but take it from me, we're running out of space-time. Demand for resources has exceeded supply for decades in marginal geopolitical areas, hence the famines and droughts; but very soon, demand is going to exceed supply *for everyone*. With the BlyssPluss Pill the human race will have a better chance of swimming. (347, emphasis in original)

Sinister though this appears already, Crake ultimately plans to eliminate the human species. Marketed worldwide, the pill harbours a deadly airborne haemorrhagic virus that takes effect several months after initial distribution and brings humanity to extinction.

Where the novel begins, in this post-apocalyptic wasteland, Jimmy-Snowman is not alone in the world but accompanied by a posthuman species, the Crakers. Developed by Crake in the once-optimistically named Paradise Compound, the Crakers are broadly human in appearance, "black, yellow, white, brown, all available skin colours. Each individual was exquisite" (Atwood 2013, 355). Developed from human embryos, the Crakers have been modified to eliminate potentially detrimental human traits: they have no emotions or sexual desires, or any capacity for abstract thought or reasoning; their susceptibility to infectious disease has been almost completely eliminated; they "drop dead" (356) aged thirty, avoiding the anxieties of old age; and their dietary requirements – eating roughage, grass, and leaves, and their own processed faeces – means that they are not reliant upon natural resources. This post-apocalyptic future uncomfortably warns the reader of the threat of scientific, technological, and ecological disaster, but also of the potentiality of re-beginning in a posthuman world in which present human attributes have been modified for optimal survival. Yet,

this post-apocalyptic future only becomes truly intelligible and comprehensible to the reader thanks to the uncanny familiarity of the pre-apocalyptic world that posits the dystopian potential as a realisable future. In other words, the novel does not ask us to imagine anything that we do not already perceive to be real and actual today, but rather to develop a "double consciousness with respect both to the fictionality of the world portrayed and to its potential as our own world's future" that enables us to see "the imagined future in our actual present and also recognize the difference between now and the future-as-imagined" (Snyder 2011, 470).

Although presented within the confines of fictional imagination, many of the elements of *Oryx and Crake*'s pre-apocalyptic world are apparent in our own contemporary environment. Today, we are already familiar with the genetic modification of plants and animals for economic and commercial profit, with the social division of an intellectual and economic elite from the rudimentary world of "asymmetries, deformities" (Atwood 2013, 339), with intense surveillance of political and personal ideologies, and even with commercially driven ideals that readily exploit our reliance upon the industrial production of medicines, food, and other commodities. Although Crake's biomedical apocalypse is presented as an extraordinary deformation of contemporary life, the resultant elimination of humanity and realisation of a posthuman species is little more than a perverse modification of current knowledge, ideology, and situation in a world in which there are no legal, ethical, or moral limitations upon the applications of our contemporary reality.

In the final, brief chapter, "Footprint," Atwood parodies the infamous scene of the footprint in *Robinson Crusoe*. Alerted by the Crakers to the presence of "others like you" (Atwood 2013, 423), Snowman arrives at the beach to find a trail of human footprints in the sand:

Here's a human footprint, in the sand. Then another one. They aren't sharp-edged, because the sand here is dry, but there's no mistaking them. And now here's a whole trail of them, leading down to the sea. Several different sizes. Where the sand turns damp he can see them better. What were these people doing? Swimming, fishing? Washing themselves?

They were wearing shoes, or sandals. Here's where they took them off, here's where they put them on again. He stamps his own good foot [the other foot is injured] into the wet sand, beside the biggest footprint: a signature of a kind. As soon as he lifts his foot away the imprint fills with water. (431)

Unlike the print Crusoe finds, the one Snowman finds is less defined and the print makers less mysterious. From these footprints, Snowman gleans an extraordinary amount of information, including details about their footwear; their heterogeneity, corresponding to three different individuals; their direction onto and away from the beach; and he is more concerned with their activities – "What were these people doing?" – than with their origins.

Snowman hesitates, pondering his next move: does he befriend the other survivors of the biomedical apocalypse, making peace with them and co-operating to survive? Or does he kill them, thus protecting the Crakers and himself from strangers? The novel leaves this conclusion open, alerting the reader only to Snowman's intention to move – "Time to go" (433) – without specifying the direction of this movement towards or away from the other human survivors.³ Yet the expectation of movement, in which Snowman will either follow the path that has been laid down or diverge from it, is precisely what augments the ambivalence of this final scene. In Hicks' discussion of *Oryx and Crake* as a post-apocalyptic re-envisioning of *Robinson Crusoe*, she argues that, following in the footprints of Crusoe, Snowman's discovery of the traces of other humans who have survived the man-made apocalypse repeats cycles of colonial violence and environmental destruction. Yet Hicks also identifies, in the novel's conclusion, the possibility of breaking away from this apocalyptic trajectory. Hicks proposes that Atwood fashions in Snowman "a Crusoe with a difference" (2016, 53), one who knows the tragic fate of his own kind and the catastrophic consequences of the former world and who "resets the clock and opens the door for a new era to begin" (2016, 53). There is, then, in Hicks' more positive reading, a resonance with Ingold's notion of wayfaring, casting Snowman as

the traveller who has acquired knowledge through the exceptional experiences of his pre- and post-apocalyptic lives and who adapts to these observations and events. As a wayfarer, Snowman's passage is one of renewal, of negotiation, and of improvisation along a path that continues always towards an undefined future.

Oryx and Crake is, in Atwood's own words, a "speculative fiction" rather than science fiction or classic dystopia, because the parallels with the contemporary world are designed to draw us into an imaginative space where what we read is no more than an extension of reality today:

Oryx and Crake is a speculative fiction, not a science fiction proper. It contains no intergalactic space travel, no teleportation, no Martians. [...] It invents nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent. Every novel begins with a *what if*, and then sets forth its axioms. The *what if* of *Oryx and Crake* is simply, *What if we continue down the road we're already on? How slippery is the slope? What are our saving graces? Who's got the will to stop us?* (Atwood 2005, 285–286, emphasis in original)

The notion that we are advancing along a path echoes Ingold's descriptions of the wayfarer and of the footprint as a reductive trace of human presence as it interacts with the world, a mark of evolutionary acquisition of knowledge and of human 'becoming' as an endless life process. Indeed, although vastly unlike the posthuman Crakers, Snowman may more accurately be described precisely as a human becoming, rather than a human being, one who is defined by the trajectory of his movement and growth and will have to adapt to survive. Yet the novel's post-apocalyptic setting radically resists any such redemptive or consolatory reading.

The closing chapter repeats, verbatim, several sentences from the opening sequence of the novel (Atwood 2013, 3 and 429), and the novel's final words echo, with only minimal modification, a short passage from the third paragraph of the first chapter. If the direction of Snowman's movement is ambiguous for the reader, the repetition of these opening and closing passages seems to suggest that the protagonist will indeed follow along this path that has been forged by the other survivors. Although we do not know if Snowman continues down their path or not, the narrative circularity of the novel looms over the possibility of any interpretation that might imply the bifurcation of Snowman's evolutionary path. For Denise Dillon, Snowman's post-apocalyptic awareness lends itself not to an alternative future but to a resignation that "time has indeed run out" (2018, 61). In Marta Korbel's reading, which interprets in the novel's conclusion Snowman's decision to approach the strangers and thus to seek companionship amongst fellow humans rather than risk the security of isolation among the posthuman Crakers, the ending is far from hopeful: "Humans are thus unwilling to consider alternative paths represented by the posthuman species, rejecting alterity and turning back towards what is familiar" (2023, 292).

This circular, repetitive movement implied in the protagonist's continuation down the path he is already on conflicts with the idea that the reductive trace is a mark of the progressive acquisition of knowledge. The footprints depict the continued unfolding of life after the apocalypse, but their relationship to knowledge and to the application of knowledge is ambivalent. As evidenced by the wasteland in which these footprints take shape, movement, and the acquisition of knowledge inherent in the work of human becoming, does not intrinsically equate to moral and epistemological improvement but may be wielded with power and violence, yielding devastating results. In a comparative reading of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Oryx and Crake* there is, in Snowman's discovery of a trail of footprints, a recognition of the continuity between human beings that was absent from Crusoe's earlier discovery; yet, if Snowman, who has witnessed the destruction of the former world, does merely carry on down the path laid out for him, the novel leaves us with nothing but the realisation of an inevitable fate that we are already too late, or too lazy, to avert.

Notes

- ¹ Tolan (2007), however, offers an excellent postfeminist reading of the novel.
- ² In the final pages of the novel, and in the two subsequent novels, the reader discovers other survivors of the apocalypse.
- ³ From the subsequent publication of *The Year of the Flood*, we establish that Snowman does, in the end, leave these other survivors unharmed.

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Reading Eternity: Haggard's *She* and Immortality in the Fin-de-siècle Novel

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Abstract: Immortality has been an enduring human desire, and certainly one that British novelists in the late century engaged with. H. Rider Haggard was one such novelist, and in his sensational *She: A History of Adventure* he raises the possibility of transcending human conceptions of time through the titular Ayesha, whose existence represents both an existential threat to the British way of life and a seductive fantasy. Although initially illegible to the explorers who encounter her, through her bodily destruction Ayesha, and the scale of time that she stands for in the text, becomes legible, dissolving the fantasy.

Keywords: *She: A History of Adventure*, H. Rider Haggard, Victorian literature, novel, immortality

Introduction: The Victorians and Immortality

Eternity as a concept is so far beyond human scale that it is unfathomable. Even vastly simplified allegories only gesture towards a truly infinite period: common fables about moving a beach one grain of sand at a time, or the ocean one drop of water at a time only approximate eternity. The task of depicting eternity in any meaningful way is a crisis of legibility, a span of time for which no conventional categories used for organizing temporal units are useful and which language fails to describe. The length of time gestured towards is simply so large that it dwarfs the units of time encountered in daily life by too many orders of magnitude to allow for linguistic representation. Despite this illegibility, the prospect of eternity and eternal life remains a seductive fantasy, and many late-century Victorian writers struggled with the dilemma by devising possible solutions, or at least suggesting possibilities, in their fiction. One such novelist, the often-bizarre H. Rider Haggard, mapped the crisis of illegibility onto the body of an unageing character whose body itself was illegible in his sensational 1887 *She: A History of Adventure*. Through her, he presented the alluring fantasy of eternal life, a possible vantage through which one might comprehend all of eternity, and through her unmaking and bodily destruction, he dissolves the fantasy but renders her, finally, legible in death. Through the deconstruction of this fantasy, what Haggard is doing is, in effect, attempting to make time outside of the scale of a human life legible in a fictional human body: despite the extensive critical commentary to date on Haggard and his novel, this aspirational project that runs underneath the other politics at work in the text has largely gone unremarked upon, and it intersects in nuanced ways with more conventional imperial, psychoanalytic, and gendered readings of Haggard's novel. In anticipation of a reading of *She*, it is prudent to provide a background in three parts: first, the fascination with immortality and eternal life in *fin-de-siècle* England, then the logistical issues that this fantasy brings, already anticipated by the Victorians themselves, and finally the path towards its representation and interrogation in Gothic, particularly Imperial Gothic, fiction.

Stories about quests for eternal youth, immortality, and the reversal of aging have existed for as long as there have been recorded narratives, but for the Victorians this fantasy was felt acutely on a societal level in their medical science as well as their spirituality. To be literal on the one hand, the simple fact was that Queen Victoria was getting old, and this was, according to Karen Chase, a difficult subject for the Victorians: "by the century's end, there were images circulating everywhere of [Victoria's] intact, corpulent persistence, her heavy refusal to die... She was of course not the only one to age: by the end of the century more people than ever were living past 50" (187). As their queen aged, there was the possibility that with her death their epoch might end, that something decidedly different, something un-Victorian, would characterize future generations. Outside of novelistic worlds in contemporary medical fields, there have long been "Immortalists," to use Susan Behuniak's term, whose "goal is to defeat old age" using medical technologies and working toward potential salvation in biology and longevity science (162). As lifespans grew longer and the effects of old age were felt acutely across the population, the theoretical groundwork for this field of medicine was already being laid in the late century.

Less centered on materiality, and perhaps on the other extreme of their political reality at the center of the empire, modernity brought to the Victorians, according to Gerald Gruman, "a marked decline of faith in supernatural salvation from death... While these beliefs are still adhered to by many in times of bereavement, their role in everyday life has been weakened greatly" (5). Despite the "material satisfactions of modern life," he argues, "the individual feels hollow and powerless when faced with death" (5). It had long been felt that there were, borrowing John Carroll's formulation, "two quite different phenomena animating the human psyche. On the one hand, there is vitality, energy, life-force, and ego. On the other, there is soul. The former constellation is mortal" (411). This is a familiar divide that is complicated considerably by the Victorian thinkers who grappled with religion and a lack of faith in it, Darwin's influential theories, and the trends in psychology in the mid-century, which "had taken on an increasingly physical bent" (Stolte 404). Tyson Stolte argues that "there was a growing acceptance even among more conservative writers of the role of the body in mental processes.... With this shift in focus to the nerves and brain came a shift in understanding: the mind came more frequently to be seen as a product of the physical body, the ontological distinction between mind and matter began to collapse, and it seemed to many that there was less and less room for any transcendent understanding of humankind" (404). As medical science advanced and lifespans increased across England, the general belief in the eternal life of the soul in the face of new discoveries was simultaneously waning.

More tangibly than life after death, the premise of eternal, or even hyperextended, earthly life presented legitimate logistical issues despite its apparent desirability. Reading Voltaire's satire *Micromégas* which presents extraterrestrial life forms who live many times longer than humans, Karl Guthke argues that "no matter how far prolonged into the future a lifetime may be envisioned, as long as it remains finite, it will allow and encourage the human subject's autonomous shaping and structuring of such a life, which gives that life its meaning" (4). In other words, Guthke, suggests, if the average human lifespan suddenly tripled, it would only represent a restructuring of the perceived phases of that newly increased lifespan (a childhood that goes on for fifty years, for example) along preexisting metrics of youth, age, and senescence. Beyond this, again from Guthke, "the prospect of a life of endless duration... suggests a radically different experience of time, one that prompts the question of the meaning of human life in such temporal infinity in an entirely different way: would any activity at all make sense once the constraints of limited time no longer exist?" (4). Writing on William Godwin's 1799 novel *St. Leon* which contains a protagonist who is given the secret to eternal life, Andrea Charise reads the thrust of the novel as ultimately leading "readers to consider how eternal individual vigor might thwart the collective goals of a benevolent society" (22). Leaving aside some legal logistical issues—what would a life sentence in prison mean for an immortal being, and how would land deeds and property transfer between generations?—a society of immor-

tals would either need to immediately cease reproduction or flood the earth in short order. The turnover between generations, while terrifying from the perspective of the waning generation in the 1880s and their own perception of their legacy, was a necessity, paradoxically, for their way of life to continue: Victorian society as the Victorians knew it would collapse if they achieved earthly immortality.

Predictably, English novelists took up these conflicting energies with a pronounced vigor in their fiction using narrative tools that included more conventional approaches in addition to the wild possibilities raised by authors like Haggard. Reading George Eliot's mid-century fiction, Edward Hurley observes that the author's "concern with death and the limits it places on the individual seems to have grown as [she] grew older. To counteract death, the role of the family expanded and began to transform the past into a new, ever widening future" in her novelistic worlds (226). This is at once conservative and utopian: many are the Victorian novels that end with babies bouncing on knees, reproductive futurity secured, but the continuity between generations in Eliot's later work is certainly a gentle way to acknowledge the passing of time and turning over of generations without a caustic downward narrative spiral in a later novel such as Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. Ted Underwood suggests that historical novels featuring "analogies between historical imagination and resurrection" suggest a "longing for immortality, felt most strongly in the moments of historical double vision that acknowledge, but magically negate, the transience of human bodies and ways of life" (443). Of these novels, he argues, the "idealization of life" emerges from efforts "to represent social totality as ceaseless change and to give their characters and readers a sense of participation in its permanence" (469). In the relationships of characters and readers to fictionalized histories and in reproductive futurity, these novelists offer ideas that do not radically rupture the realism of their storyworlds.

These appeals to continuity between historical periods and frequent insinuations of reproductive futurity abounded in the British novel throughout the decades of Victoria's reign, but late in her life and late in the century new and more experimental approaches to eternal life emerged in the complex webs of the Imperial Gothic¹ novel. Patrick Brantlinger cites the three major themes of this genre as "the waning of opportunities for heroic adventure," "regression," and "invasion" (239). For the masculine, thoroughly British adventurers and explorers who populate these novels, the secret and yet-unexplored nooks and crannies beyond England's borders present the last spaces for the supposed derring-do lacking in modern life, and with it threats of siege by powerful, sometimes supernatural, forces from abroad. Stoker's *Dracula* perhaps typifies the genre best, but both *She* and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* traffic in its conventions and use its form to, according to Stephen Arata, "not only articulate and account" for the waning British hegemony in the late-century, but "also to defend against and even to assuage the anxiety attendant upon cultural decay" (622-3). These novels often include tremendously powerful, monstrous immortals, pitted against the British citizens who are made to encounter in them a nightmarish vision of the possible future as well as the ancient past: a figure such as Count Dracula has in him the double helix strains of potential future conquest as well as centuries-old knowledge and customs that defy (or simply don't align with) contemporary logic and mores.² In these novels, according to Arata, "a terrifying reversal has occurred: the colonizer finds himself in the position of the colonized, the exploiter becomes exploited, the victimizer victimized" (623). In addition to Arata's formulation, vitally, in these texts, the *reader* becomes himself *read and translated*, an uncomfortable reversal that is only undone as the immortal reader of his body and mind perishes. For all of the impossible happenings and wild plotting in Haggard's *She*, it is grounded, at its very core, in frustrated acts of reading and translation.

The Difficulty in Reading *She*

H. Rider Haggard is far from an excellent prose stylist. V.S. Pritchett wrote of him that, "like many popular best-sellers, he was a very sad and solemn man who took himself too seriously and his art not

seriously enough. The fact is that he was a phenomenon before he was a novelist: other novelists are content to be simply themselves, Rider Haggard was his public" (25). Despite his limitations as a writer, he was and remains immensely popular, and many of his novels have never been out of print. *She: A History of Adventure* was a smash hit and helped inspire generations of adventure novels and Hollywood films, few of which linger with the reader or viewer like Haggard's novel does in its starkest and most shocking moments. Aside from Ayesha's (the titular "She") horrific and memorable demise, there are destructive storms, lost civilizations, supernatural murders, and caverns full of beautifully preserved corpses. Haggard claimed that the novel was written in only six weeks, "at white heat, almost without rest...I remember that when I sat down to the task my ideas as to its development were of the vaguest. The only clear notion that I had in my head was that of an immortal woman inspired by an immortal love. All the rest shaped itself round this figure" (reprinted in Cohen 97). Describing Haggard's work in another famous quote, Pritchett wrote that "E.M. Forster once spoke of the novelist sending down a bucket into the unconscious; the author of *She* installed a suction pump. He drained the whole reservoir of the public's secret desires" (Pritchett 25–6). Almost certainly, the frenzied composition of the novel has led to its rich history in psychoanalysis and other fields of literary studies: reading through it, one does get the sense that Haggard had the germ of the text, Ayesha and her millennia-spanning love affair, and the rest flowed almost unbidden and unfiltered from the recesses of his mind.

Perhaps this wellspring emerged from Haggard's own inability to precisely narrate his lived experiences in Africa as a much younger man, a preoccupation of his characters in *She* who likewise fail to do so for much of the novel. In a typical example from his autobiography, Haggard writes, "I saw a curious sight the other day, a witch dance. I cannot attempt to describe it, it is a vague sort of thing" (*Day of My Life* 56). Of this episode, Robbie McLaughlin suggests that "Haggard's inability to articulate or depict the scene with which he is confronted exemplifies the shortcomings of colonial discourse and a teasing quality always present in his oeuvre. This imbues his narratives with a loaded ambiguity" (78). This perhaps gives Haggard a clearer, more well-defined artistic intention across his catalog of work than the "white heat" the novelist himself describes. Perhaps the truth, or a version of it, lies between this sort of coy ambivalence towards colonialism and groping, fetishizing curiosity: if the germ of this and other events on the so-called "dark continent" remained with Haggard for decades, his fiction can be read as an attempt to interrogate and make sense of that which he could not articulate. *She* and his other novels become a laboratory to test different forms of storytelling, narration, and meaning-making in fiction that eluded Haggard in his biographical writing. This dovetails nicely with Haggard's reply to an early review of *She*, wherein he writes that the novel is in "the first place, an attempt is made in it to follow the action of the probable effects of immortality working upon the known and ascertained substance of the mortal. This is a subject with a prospective interest for us all" ("Who is 'She'?" 13). Beyond the limits of Haggard's ability to articulate his lived experience, and beyond the limits of general lived human experience, *She* is poised from its conception to offer ways of reading and translating that which eludes by its very nature easy description.

The novel is presented as a manuscript given to an editor by the self-labeled misogynist Horace Holly, a Cambridge scholar, and his younger ward Leo Vincey as they prepare to set out to "Thibet," as it is spelled in the novel, to continue their adventures. Leo's father dies of a wasting disease as the narrative begins, and Holly is charged with raising and teaching the boy, who becomes a fast favorite at the university due to his charm and beauty. His education includes classical subjects, sports such as shooting, and half a decade of intensive and extensive language training in Arabic in addition to Greek and Latin. On his twenty-fifth birthday, Leo comes into his inheritance, a mysterious chest full of instructions, artifacts, glyphs, and translations from across continents and across centuries that points the pair towards Africa in search of a mythical source of eternal life, along with an Arab ship captain Mahomed and their manservant Job. Their ship wrecks in a storm, and they

encounter a lost race of natives called the Amahagger who guide them to Kôr, the domain of She-who-must-be-obeyed, a “Diana in jack-boots” and the mystical immortal queen of an underground kingdom who believes Leo is the reincarnation of a lost love from two thousand years prior (Etherington 80). Holly narrates the text, and it is through him that the reader learns most of the information about Ayesha, her history, and the lost knowledge and treasures in her kingdom. Eventually, in the novel’s climax, she reveals to the men a mystical pillar of flame that confers eternal life on those who dare to step into it. To prove that it is safe for Leo to do so, Ayesha bathes in the fire a second time, and, in an instant, ages two thousand years as her immortality is stripped from her. The men, physically and mentally scarred, then flee home to England, aided by an Amahagger elder, Billali, who took an earlier liking to Holly.

The text primes the reader, through its main male duo, to expect acts of reading in the mode of an archeological dig, or a tour through a museum of pilfered artifacts. The excessive flurry of foreign objects and translations Leo and Holly encounter before setting off on their journey, according to Katy Brundan, “is deliberate. First, the translations...reinforce the heroes’ philological learning and replicate the kind of appendices one finds in explorer’s narratives. At the same time, their very excess signals the novel’s knowing participation in absurd Orientalist fantasies” (Brundan 964). Everything from the veiled instructions upon Leo’s maturation to the mysterious treasure box to its contents engages with this fantasy. This continues as Holly narrates Africa and the people he encounters there. The Amahagger, fortuitously, speak Arabic, and Holly tells them, “We are of a brave race who fear not death...that is, if we can get a little fresh information before we die” (*She* 91). When he is faced with cultural customs that are unfamiliar to his genteel, British norms, Holly turns to simple simile. He translates, in other words, things such as women picking their husbands, a freer exchange of spouses, and matrilineal lines of heredity to a lexicon he and his imagined audience are already familiar with: “I am bound, however, to say that the change of husbands was not nearly so frequent as might have been expected. Nor did quarrels arise out of it, at least among the men, who, when their wives deserted them in favour of a rival, accepted the whole thing much as we accept the income-tax or our marriage laws” (*She* 94). A few pages later, he performs a similar surveying analysis of the types of livestock the Amahagger keep, their distribution of labor, and more, all in the mode of an anthropologist gathering and organizing information for a domestic readership.

This continues as the men are led towards Kôr, even after Mahomed is killed by the Amahagger; his death does little to change Holly’s prying eyes and approach to knowledge-seeking. The entire kingdom, according to Shawn Malley, is itself a sort of archeological site. He writes that much “in the way archaeology resurrects past cultures from places of interment, Holly and Leo penetrate the spirit of the past in the catacombs of Kôr” (287). Initially, even Ayesha, Malley suggests, fits this mold: “[v]eiled and mummy-like, she has been preserved from the modern archaeologist figuratively to unwrap” (289). Holly sees Ayesha first in a dream, very much in the form of a puzzle he must solve:

My dreams that night when at last I got to sleep were not of the pleasantest...in the background, as it were, a veiled form was always hovering, which, from time to time, seemed to draw the coverings from its body, revealing now the perfect shape of a lovely blooming woman, and now again the white bones of a grinning skeleton, and which, as it veiled and unveiled, uttered the mysterious and apparently meaningless sentence:

‘That which is alive hath known death, and that which is dead yet can never die, for in the Circle of the Spirit life is nought and death is nought. Yea, all things live for ever, though at times they sleep and are forgotten (She 115, italics in original).

At this point unaware of precisely what he is seeing, Holly seems poised to do what Haggard could not, solving the puzzle of the signs and symbols he encounters by making their hidden meanings apparent. He has been given a sort of riddle through his dream; the reader might expect him to work through the riddle, informed by the information in the chest left behind by Leo’s father and the inquisitive spirit of the gentleman explorer.

Shortly thereafter, Holly's attempts to make sense of what he reads around him are thwarted. His dream vision is the final time in the text, until the pages concerning Ayesha's demise, that he will be established as the interpreter of any text or message at all. At first, his descriptive powers fail him, and he admits that it has become "quite impossible to describe [Kôr's] grim grandeur as it appeared to me" (*She* 131). Then, he is faced with a language that, despite his extensive training, he cannot translate: "Between the pictures were columns of stone characters of a formation absolutely new to me; at any rate they were neither Greek nor Egyptian, nor Hebrew, nor Assyrian—that I can swear to. They looked more like Chinese than anything else" (134). He will later repeat this same guess, that it "looked more like Chinese writing than any other that I am acquainted with," almost as if he feels compelled to lend credence to his guesswork as something closer to fact than speculation (172). These mounting inadequacies reach their summit when Holly attempts to read the actual body of the woman he saw in his dream vision. He relates that he could "not see the person, but I could distinctly feel his or her gaze, and, what is more, it produced a very odd effect upon my nerves. I felt frightened, I don't know why" (142). Resorting to pure physical description, Holly is again frustrated: "I say a figure, for not only her body, but also her face, was wrapped up in soft white, gauzy material in such a way as at first sight to remind me most forcibly of a corpse in grave clothes. And yet I do not know why it should have given me that idea, seeing that the wrappings were so thin that one could distinctly see the gleam of the pink flesh beneath them... Anyhow, I felt more frightened than ever at this ghost-like apparition" (143). The steady, sure adventurer who likens unfamiliar rituals and customs to those in London has been bested; his resigned, atypical "anyhow" is at once a jarring tonal change from his earlier anthropological tenor yet also a perfect encapsulation of his confused state as a frustrated reader.

Here, for the first time in the text, Holly finds himself as an object being read rather than the reader. Ayesha informs him that he "wast afraid because mine eyes were searching out thine heart, therefore wast thou afraid" (144). She removes her shawl, and Holly, faced with her unearthly beauty, finds words desert him again: "How am I to describe it? I cannot—simply, I cannot! The man does not live whose pen could convey a sense of what I saw" (153). He is unable to read Ayesha, including her physical body, her thoughts, and her motivations in much the same way that he is unable to read the text adorning the walls, statues, and reliefs in Kôr. Haggard positions Ayesha as a human manifestation of the unknowable, the entirety of Kôr and all that it represents in miniature. Brundan argues that she presents an "overarching linguistic threat toward the British men" which is especially noticeable when Ayesha engages in a "reverse translation scenario," reading the British men who expected to be in the position of privileged viewers and readers of the lost civilization (959). It is Ayesha who peers into Holly's mind, and Ayesha who determines that Leo is Kallikrates, her long-dead lover, inscribing him with an identity that is not his own. Further, her body itself frustrates attempts to understand her, as her corporeal form does not bely her true nature. Holly asks, "Thou art a woman, and no spirit. How can a woman live two thousand years? Why dost thou befool me, oh Queen?" (*She* 148). By way of answer, Ayesha "leaned back upon he couch, and once more [Holly] felt the hidden eyes playing upon [him] and searching out [his] heart" (148). She does not show her age; she lacks the lines on her face that should signal her thousands of years on the earth, and Holly lacks the ability to translate the effect of this gap between appearance and true nature into lines on the page. When she questions his understanding of her motives and actions, Holly, meekly, tells the reader "I was dumbfounded, and could not answer. The matter was too overpowering for my intellect to grasp" (149).

Ayesha, the symbol of that which Holly does not know, cannot read, and is unable to translate into narrative material for the reader, is both absolutely enigmatic and, through her enigma, absolutely seductive in the fantasy she represents: Holly might, Haggard suggests, come to speak these hidden languages and know what is unknowable if he were to learn her secret to eternal life. Ayesha will later translate the ancient language to Holly and Leo aloud, and it is only through her words that the men

are able to understand her, rather than their observations. She reframes Holly's sense of temporal scale by orders of magnitude, two thousand years of perspective to the twenty years Holly has been preparing himself and Leo to undertake the journey to Kôr:

What are ten or twenty or fifty thousand years in the history of life? Why in ten thousand years scarce will the rain and storms lessen a mountain top by a span in thickness? In two thousand years these caves have not changed, nought has changed, but the beasts and man, who is as the beasts. There is nought that is wonderful about the matter, couldst thou but understand. Life is wonderful, ay, but that it should be a little lengthened is not wonderful (150).

Appealing to geologic time rather than the time of mechanical clocks or even human lives, Ayesha reframes the purported purpose of this quest—to find the secret of eternal life—as something almost banal: life itself is wonderful, but after thousands of years she is jaded to its infinite extension. In bed hours later, Holly tells the reader he “began to gather my scattered wits, and reflect upon what I had seen and heard. But the more I reflected the less I could make of it” (156). Patricia Murphy indicates that this gap in perceived time and historical epochs between Holly and Ayesha “creates a suffocating and disorienting effect through the bewildering layers of centuries incorporated within She and consequently stymies efforts to affix her within a temporal span” (Murphy 764). Ayesha exists in time, but on a scale that is tantalizingly out of reach, escaping Holly's language and logic, but similar enough to seduce him. It is, like the unknown language he encounters, *almost like* touchstones he has access to, outside his grasp but well within Ayesha's.

The temptation that Ayesha represents is tempered by Haggard quickly, then by Holly's post-hoc footnotes in his fictional manuscript sometime after he returns from Africa, and finally by the shocking idea that she might decide, on a lark, to dominate the world and rule over it for eternity. The first is a subtle distinction that Ayesha draws, beyond Holly's comprehension, that, according to her, “there is no such thing as magic, though there is such a thing as understanding and applying the forces which are in nature” (*She* 184). She repeats this point upon demonstrating further supernatural powers ranging from clairvoyance to “blasting,” which amounts to instantaneous murder, “I tell thee I deal not in magic—there is no such thing. ‘Tis only a force that thou dost not understand” (195). Wendy Katz explains that a “good deal of Ayesha's attraction is created by her extreme wilfulness—she does whatever she wishes, regardless of the consequences... She is, after all, not the stoical and well-disciplined Englishman... but a more complex sort of leader, more aware of the sheer pleasures of power and very much more terrifying. At the same time, she is practically irresistible” (125–6). To Holly (indeed, to the reader), she seems a being of pure will: she decides to murder Leo's Amahagger lover Ustane with a thought, and so it happens. She denies the use of magic, any sort of comprehensible system, and only provides the information that there is yet another undefined, foreign set of forces and laws outside the Englishman's experiences and perhaps even his wildest dreams. This I argue is one of the cruxes of the fantasy of the immortal figure, that she has access to lexica mere mortals do not have and will never have, an understanding of things that is precluded by the nature of their more transient existence. What Haggard does by turning her to cold-blooded murder is spoiling this temptation, denying any possible utopian application so that, when Ayesha is undone and Holly can finally make sense of what he has seen and done, it has the sting of melodrama, a Faustian deal gone bad, rather than the tragic fall of a noble, star-crossed queen.

Slowly processing what is happening around him, Holly puts down the narrator's pen and takes up the role of editor of his manuscript by adding an informative footnote. After remarking that Ayesha is a “mysterious creature of evil tendencies,” in the main text, he digresses:

After some months of consideration of this statement I am bound to confess that I am not quite satisfied of its truth. It is perfectly true that Ayesha committed a murder, but I shrewdly suspect that were we endowed with the same absolute power, and if we had the same tremendous interest at stake, we should be very apt to do likewise under parallel circumstances... It is a well-known fact that very often,

putting the period of boyhood out of the question, the older we grow the more cynical and hardened we get, indeed many of us are only saved by timely death from utter moral petrification if not moral corruption... Now the oldest man upon the earth was but a babe compared to Ayesha, and the wisest man upon the earth was not one-third as wise (221).

This reads as an attempt to, simply put, establish agency in his own story when he had none. In the narrative, Holly has admitted he “would give [his] immortal soul to marry” Ayesha, so the digressive footnote and its philosophical musings ring with both Holly’s voice and Haggard’s (182). Mark Doyle points out that, for a writer concerned with moral decay and societal rot, “Ayesha’s immortality... represents a way to fight the moral and physical devolution that Haggard feared” (A69). By crafting Ayesha as a figure that is tempting but illegible, and then a force of pure destructive will, Haggard is both tempering her desirability outside of the narrative and inside of it. This is further exacerbated when Ayesha declares, “the law! Canst thou not understand, oh Holly, that I am above the law, and so shall my Kallikrates be also? All human law will be to us as the north wind to a mountain. Does the wind bend the mountain, or the mountain the wind?” (232). She returns to geologic metaphors, rendering the British Empire as a gust against her mountain, and only then does Holly realize, finally, what he has risked by embarking on this venture: “In the end she would, I had little doubt, assume absolute rule over the British dominions, and probably over the whole earth, and though I was sure that she would speedily make ours the most glorious and prosperous empire that the world has ever seen, it would be at the cost of a terrible sacrifice of life” (233). Even here, Ayesha is a temptation that is hard to resist. Gerald Monsman cites exactly “this godlike refusal to subject her passion to moral law” as the core of what endows the character “with dread and splendor” (194). Here, Holly mixes linguistic registers, contemplating glory and prosperity built upon untold quantities of the dead. His use of “our Empire” belies the true root of the matter; the prospect of Ayesha’s conquest is only even somewhat amenable to him because he is confident she and Leo would ensure England became the absolute seat of global geopolitical power, and he would thusly benefit. It goes without saying that if she had, in another version of the text, proposed to remake the globe in the mold of the native Amahagger’s society, his reaction would be considerably more outraged.

Part of Ayesha’s plan involves making Leo immortal through the same ritual she underwent many centuries prior and using him, Holly realizes, as a sort of interpreter, as she does not speak English. To borrow from Brundan’s formulation again, Ayesha’s “plan involves transforming Leo as a translator changes a text: domesticating its otherness, bringing it nearer to the target culture” so that he might be more useful and desirable to Ayesha (973). This is a narrative move that mirrors Dracula’s transformation of young women into his thralls, and is in the vein of the Imperial Gothic novels which threaten a fate worse than death for the adventurers: they might, it seems, be left alive, perhaps even enriched with mystical power, but they would become thoroughly un-British at the whims of a being powerful enough to circumvent or outright ignore the laws and moral imperatives they hold so dear. Ayesha has been revealed as an existential threat to their very way of being, but unlike other immortal villains such as the evil Dracula, there is no apparent way to destroy her. Seemingly without a solution to the mounting problem they have inadvertently traveled across the world to find, Holly and Leo are led further into the caverns of Kôr towards the pillar of life that has granted Ayesha her immortality, a horrifying and apocalyptic climax to the text.

Much has been said about the short, three-page span comprising Ayesha’s demise, perhaps more than has been written about the other several hundred pages of the novel. Trying to demonstrate to the men that the fiery pillar of life is safe, Ayesha steps into it so that Leo might follow. Its power, Holly and Leo discover, is stripped away upon a second bath in its heat, and each of Ayesha’s two thousand years crashes down on her with the force of a hurricane. Sandra Gilbert reads the pillar of life as “an almost theatrically rich sexual symbol... a fiery signifier whose eternal thundering return speaks the inexorability of the patriarchal Law She has violated in her satanically overreaching ambition” (130). Her rapid aging upon her reentrance into the fire has been called a “Darwinian

nightmare” of evolution in reverse by Judith Wilt (264), “retrogressive evolution” by Rebecca Stott (115), and “a fiasco beyond human comprehension” by Henry Miller (92). Andrew Libby, interestingly, has called this climactic scene more “convenient and far-fetched than it is convincing,” noting Haggard’s “inability to legitimately dispose of [Ayesha’s] threat” and anxiety “attending the rise of female power” (11–12). There is a sort of contrapasso to the scene, the unmaking of the queen by the same divine fiat that granted her power to begin with, and the sudden, horrible devolution that she suffers has the smack of a depraved, biblical justice, but Libby’s point is worth taking very seriously indeed: Ayesha is not undone by a stake to the heart, but by what appears to be random (or arbitrary) chance. Haggard, I would suggest, isn’t in any hurry to “be rid” of Ayesha because he has written himself into a position that is impossible to escape. Simon Magus has argued along this line previously, noting that “so keen was Haggard to destroy this character—terrifying femme fatale and personification of the overly powerful ‘New Woman’ of Victorian society—that he brought her back for a sequel and two prequels” (168–9). The scene is best read then, not as a quick and too-convenient killing, but a reorientation that puts the pen back in Holly’s hand and allows him, finally, to read and narrate Ayesha and reclaim his narrative primacy as the reader rather than the object that is read.

The chapter title itself, “What We Saw,” indicates the nature of Haggard’s narrative sleight-of-hand. This is Holly’s reclamation of mastery in the text, achieved through Ayesha’s death. Portions of this spectacular passage are worth reprinting:

True enough—I faint even as I write it in the living presence of that terrible recollection—she *was* shrivelling up; the golden snake that had encircled her gracious form slipped over her hips and fell upon the ground; smaller and smaller she grew; her skin changed colour, and in place of the perfect whiteness of its lustre it turned dirty brown and yellow, like an old piece of withered parchment. She felt at her bald head: the delicate hand was nothing but a claw now, a human talon like that of a badly-preserved Egyptian mummy, and then she seemed to realise what kind of change was passing over her, and she shrieked—ah, she shrieked!—she rolled upon the floor and shrieked!

...

At last she lay still, or only feebly moving. She who, but two minutes before, had gazed upon us the loveliest, noblest, most splendid woman the world had ever seen, she lay still before us, near the masses of her own dark hair, no larger than a big monkey, and hideous—ah, too hideous for words. And yet, think of this—at that very moment I thought of it—it was the same woman! (*She* 261, 263).

In her death throes, Holly compares Ayesha to a shriveled monkey and a tortoise, and, certainly, he leans on the languages of evolution and devolution in his descriptions. He also, however, uses another curious phrase: she becomes parchment. For all his earlier inability to speak, comprehend, and read her, finally, Ayesha is transformed into a state that Holly can narrate. He calls Ayesha “too hideous for words,” and then continues to use his words to describe her despite this. He reaches to the reader and makes a demand: “think of this.” Even the comparison to a mummy reframes the situation in terms that Holly, ever the archeologist, can understand and relate to the reader, rather than an impossible, unique event without any reference point.

As Ayesha loses her ability to speak and her power in the narrative, Holly takes over and becomes once again the expert and focalizing force he was in the earliest chapters of the text, scholar and authority over the manuscript that he will produce. When the pair is eventually rescued and led out from Kôr by Billali, Holly renarrates what happened in his own vision, rather than a truthful retelling of events: “I set to work and told him—not everything, indeed, for I did not think it desirable to do so, but sufficient for my purpose, which was to make him understand that *She* was really no more, having fallen into some fire, and, as I put it—for the real thing would have been incomprehensible to him—been burnt up” (274–5). By watching thousands of years enter Ayesha’s body over the span of two minutes, Holly has learned how to read that span of time where he simply couldn’t at earlier points in the text and can narrate it to his imagined reading public.

Other novels of the period include immortal figures who are killed, but none have such vivid, lengthy scenes wherein characters read the dying body. Dorian Gray's suicide and Dracula's killing are quick, and, despite Holly's assurance that Ayesha ages and dies in only a few minutes, the scene is long and lingers with the reader even though the text continues for several additional chapters. Mixing scientific registers of (d)evolution, archeological metaphors, and affective shock and horror, Haggard has Holly "invent" the language required to describe and understand time so far out of scale compared to the single human lifespan. This is the language required to describe and ultimately deconstruct the fantasy of eternal life, an almost instantaneous rot that sets in after being delayed for centuries. The book *She* as Holly purports to have written it in the storyworld is a guidebook on close reading and interrogating the fantasy that so obviously fascinated Haggard and other late-century authors, squashed and made abhorrent because it is unattainable and out of reach. That Haggard would resurrect Ayesha repeatedly in other novels speaks to her vibrancy as a figure and the seductive nature of her eternal youth, always tempting, and always oscillating between aspirational and obscene.

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Notes

¹ Sometimes called the Imperial Romance

² Jeffrey Franklin argues that these figures are "generally tied to a prior age and are reactionary in relationship to the progress associated with science, technology, and market growth" (167). I would suggest that they are perhaps more nuanced than this, and look forward as well as backwards, offering possible futures as well as remaining symbolically tethered to an older form of being.

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Structures of Urban Design in 19th Century American Literature

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Urban centers have long acted as both a setting and a subject of literary production, but their various historical forms give pause to the designer, architect, sociologist, historian, critic, poet, or novelist who seeks to pin them down. Even the phrase “the city” leads to conceptual difficulties; can one speak of the city as an abstract idea which takes specific form as a product of its historical situation, environment, and inhabitants? Or is one limited to speaking of specific areas of specific cities at a single moment in time? Expressions of city life can be understood in relation to each other by their ties to physical aspects of urban design and *la vie quotidienne*, which remain relatively constant in their psychological and spiritual impact on the city dweller and, by extension, the author. Of all these physical aspects, the wall is perhaps the most consistently present in urban life; it is also one of the most contextually variable. The wall is such a basic element of urban structure that it cannot be neatly correlated with any single psychological effect, yet the ways in which it can have psychological significance are defined through several inherent contradictions. These include: the wall as a site of defense and the wall as a constraining element; the wall as a vantage point and the wall as a structured obscurity; the wall as a canvas for beautifying urban design elements and the wall as an ugly, often blank, imposition; and, perhaps most significantly, the divide between interior and exterior. By situating the textual wall somewhere on the spectrum of these contradictions, and in the work’s own urban context, the relationship between urban design and literary expression reveals itself. The idea of the wall can be expanded beyond literal structures to include all of the structural principles of urban life—such as the rhythms of urban attention, which can be understood as a kind of phantasmagoria—but even these are often shaped and defined by literal urban structures.

Few stories deal with the psychological impact of walls more directly than Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street.” In this story, the constraining and obscuring nature of the wall is self-evident. From the first pages, the narrator evasively describes the limited view of his Wall Street office, trapped between the white wall of an air shaft—a view “deficient in what landscape painters call ‘life’” (Melville 2)—and a brick wall blackened by age (2). Everything about this setting evokes limitation. The deficiency of life at both ends of the office is in itself oppressive, but the opposite colors of the wall are also significant. The narrator is situated in a grey area between white and black. Thus the story begins literally in medias res, in the middle of a color spectrum greyed by the city; in other words, Wall Street is shown as a monotonous and unnatural muddle of life from which all spontaneous life has been sapped. Even when color is introduced later, it carries a similar tone: the narrator brings out “a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby” (6). This folding screen, as manmade greenery, demarcates the office and reminds its occupants that it is a space of property. The screen is like a hedgerow defining property lines, yet robbed of any genuine natural beauty. This distortion of natural elements is rebuked at the story’s very end when the narrator observes “grass-seeds, dropped by birds” (29) in the heart of the Tombs, the prison where Bartleby dies. Yet even these are only present as the result of “some strange magic”

(29); the narrator's conception of the logical city does not allow for the intrusion of natural color or any form of spontaneous expression.

Yet the wall has potential for positive form. Properly constructed, a wall is a space of refuge and imagination. Gaston Bachelard famously promotes this view in his book *The Poetics of Space*: "every corner... is a symbol of solitude for the imagination; that is to say, it is the *germ*" (Bachelard 155, italics added). The motif of the seed, which Bachelard notes, is essential to understanding healthy human space. A certain level of constraint in urban design is not just unavoidable, but *necessary* to the psychological and imaginative development of the human being; the "grass-seeds" in the Tombs are symbols of potential which have found expression as opposed to the withered husk which Bartleby becomes. Thus the ancient character of the Tombs, enriched by the healthy germination of the subject, becomes something of a sanatorium offering refuge, not isolation. The history of Wall Street lends itself to this interpretation of the wall as a demarcation of significant space rather than an obstruction.



Figure 1. "Vienna Before Redevelopment," Vienna 1844 (Schorske 28)

In its era of Dutch settlement, when New York was New Amsterdam, the current site of Wall Street was occupied by an actual wall built as protection against the English (Lorenzini, "The Dutch and the English, Part 1"). From its earliest form as a relatively simple wooden wall in 1653 ("Part 1") to its final stone iteration, which resembled the walled cities of Holland (Lorenzi, "The Dutch and the English, Part 5"), the wall crossed the island of Manhattan at the same point; also consistent in the development of the wall was its adjacent glacis, which ranged from 12 feet at the earliest time of construction (Lorenzi, "Part 1") to 44 feet in 1653 (Lorenzi, "The Dutch and the English, Part 3"). The glacis is highly significant to the relationship between urban design and its human subject. In its military context, it is functional vacant space. It makes attacking the walls it surrounds more difficult for land armies and allows the defender a vantage point against invasion. In wartime urban design, the existence of a wall and its glacis concentrates significant buildings into an urban core, in order to keep them both safe and within reasonable distance of each other; the density of many modern European cities can be traced back to this necessity. When the need for these walls disappeared, the swaths of space left vacant by the glacis actually became something of a playground for the architect and urban planner. The late destruction of the wall and vacancy of the glacis was highly significant to the deliberate 19th century development of Vienna (Schorske 27; Figure 1). The Viennese Ringstraße, like New York's Wall Street, was a practical source of open space for development and,

after development, an outline of the city's military history. This military history is tacitly expressed in "Bartleby" in the office's function as a barrack, hosting the narrator and his strange posse of scribes who each display a militaristic devotion to authority—the narrator's worship of "the late John Jacob Astor" (1) and Turkey's submissive insistence that he must "marshal and deploy [his] columns" (3) are the strongest examples of this militarism—and the intense reactions to Bartleby's gentle but firm refusals of the narrator's orders make sense in the context of Wall Street as a raging battle of capital whose leaders cannot accept dissent. Wall Street, as portrayed by Melville, neatly summarizes the wall's contradiction as both a source of obscurity and a vantage point. Its original military function is a form of productive obscurity and protects the inhabitants; its modern function is both a reminder of this obscurity, as the narrator's chambers prove, and a site of modern development for New York.

This discussion of Wall Street opens major questions about the wall as a street and, inversely, the street as a wall. In Melville, the urban wall is uncompromisingly restrictive and limiting; but in other works, and in real urban design, the wall often channels the psychological and spiritual fermentation of urban life in productive ways. Urban navigation, a skill which city dwellers cultivate over time, requires an awareness of how the street and the wall interact; the practical knowledge of how to navigate the river of the crowd is essential. Edgar Allen Poe, who played with this idea consistently, depicts a classic flâneur analyzing, entering, and moving through the masses of London in "The Man of the Crowd". At the story's beginning, he catalogues the various urban "types" to be found: "noblemen, merchants, attorneys, tradesmen, stock-jobbers...cast-off graces of the gentry...the race of swell pick-pockets...gamblers...the dandies and the military men" (Poe 484–5). The narrator proves himself capable of analysis from the privileged space of the café, but is separated by its "smoky panes" (483); even as he pushes his "brow to the glass" (487) in examination, he remains separate. Poe, with his discussion of the glass, very subtly investigates the role of materials in urban design. At first, it functions only as a window, or as a vantage point from which the crowd may be surveyed. As the story unfolds, the man of the crowd—who, like the narrator, does not neatly fit into the categorized urban "types"—absorbs the narrator's attention completely and becomes his double; more properly, the narrator examines his own veiled id after leaving the café, a safe space representing the ego. In the context of this doubling, the glass of the café becomes a mirror. Finally, as the narrator notices the man of the crowd, he catches sight "both of a diamond and a dagger" (488). The crystal signifies luxury, but it also alludes to the crystal ball, a symbol of a future which is fixed but inscrutable to the narrator who cannot read it. Thus glass, throughout the story, becomes more and more opaque to the narrator. This increasing opacity mimics the narrator's confusion and gradual loss of faith in his own navigation of the city.

While he begins the story with "the vivid yet candid reason of Leibniz" (482), easily forming a taxonomy of the city, he admits at its end that the man of the crowd cannot be read (492). This shift is bound up in the wall-esque nature of the crowd itself. At the story's beginning, the narrator sees the way in which crowd members impede each other as bizarre: "when impeded...these people suddenly ceased muttering, but redoubled their gesticulations...if jostled, they bowed profusely to the jostlers" (483). In other words, the very idea of impediment in the crowd is alien. The narrator moves deftly and silently (490) until he must, finally, cease (492). His navigation where others are jostled indicates that he is, in a sense, walking through walls as easily as he saw through the glass; if not for the cursory mention that he makes his way onto the street (488), one might assume he simply drifted through the window, too. Urban navigation implies, in a sense, a ghostly ability to see and walk through walls. Urban navigation is distinct from the analytic: "[routine circulations] are not controlled by any image or plan that can be represented in words, diagrams, or gestures; they manifest rather somatic intelligence" (Tuan 208). Urban navigation is somatic, instinctual, ghostly, and above all unconscious; the city dweller moves on "autopilot." The horror of "The Man of the Crowd" lies in the disruption of these unconscious abilities. The narrator is pushed out of the realm of disinterested contemplation and forced into instinctual, somatic navigation. This "somatic intel-

ligence" still proves unfruitful and, in a sense, unconsummated. The unreadability of the man of the crowd begins as mysterious; it only becomes horrific when it engages and frustrates the narrator on a bodily level. As the man of the crowd disrupts his "somatic intelligence," the narrator begins to mistrust his own body and his unconscious assumptions about the city. In other words, there is an acknowledgment and disruption of what Georg Simmel sees as a phenomenon "unconditionally reserved to the metropolis...the blasé attitude" (Simmel 51). The blasé attitude is rooted in experience and confidence in one's ability to understand the city. The crowd only becomes a source of fear when one must give up the blasé attitude and engage with it directly. In such engagement, the crowd ceases to be an abstract object of contemplation and becomes a concrete structure; this structure is unfamiliar to the typical city dweller. It is no longer another object situated within the city's walls (the crowd, when understood abstractly, is equal to the subject since they are both situated within the walls of the city) and transforms into a structural element of the city, i.e., a living wall.

The sense of horror at the narrator's lost ability to read the crowd—which is a coded inability to read the deeper neuroses of his own psyche—is rooted in this transformation. The crowd, which does not impose itself on the typical blasé city dweller, suddenly impedes the navigation of the city and renders lived experience obsolete. The narrator's anxiety at the "waywardness" (Poe, "Crowd" 491) of the man of the crowd represents this shift into confusion. Central to this dichotomy of crowd as object and crowd as structure is the question of interior and exterior city life. In other words, when the crowd is made an abstract object of thought, it can neatly coexist with other objects of thought, as though the urban "types" were brought into a safe interior (e.g., a café or a study) and arranged on a shelf. When the narrator is pushed out of the café, the space of the ego, into the psyche itself, the crowd cannot be neatly arranged but surrounds the narrator, taking the place of the safe interior. Nothing could be more Gothic than this unstructured, shifting interior. It offers all the worst qualities of the wall—namely, the constraining element found in Melville—with none of the reinforcement or security implied by the wall's early military function or the safety which Bachelard, among others, identifies with the interior.

Another Poe story, "The Cask of Amontillado," reiterates this tie between interiority as the realm of safe, accessible memory and exteriority as the realm of dynamic novelty—the "shock factor" which Walter Benjamin made central in his analysis of 19th-century Paris (Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" 159)—although that story's narrative is, in relation to the city, completely opposite to "The Man of the Crowd." It does not begin in a safe, ego-shielding space but in "the supreme madness of the carnival season" (Poe, "The Cask of Amontillado" 510–11); the narrator does not survey the crowd from afar, then join it, but picks out his prey and brings him to an interior space (512). As with "The Man of the Crowd," this interior is a place of memory. However, memory is elevated from its role as a navigational principle and expanded to include family history. The vault is a constant reminder of the "thousand injuries" (510) which Montresor's family has borne; his monomania is reinforced by the space through its distance from social life and its materials. Frank Lloyd Wright, in a moment of optimism, predicted that "walls themselves because of glass will become windows and windows as we used to know them as holes in walls will be seen no more" (Wright 53). In his discussion of what walls will be, one recognizes what walls were. The glass of "The Man of the Crowd" functions as a vantage point, a mirror, and a crystal ball; each of its functions enable the subject, extending their vision of the world outside. With the latter two functions, Poe distorts this extension of the subject for horrific effect, but it is intrinsic to the glass in the story. In stark contrast, the nitre which ensnares Montresor and Fortunato is oppressive, constraining, and insular (Poe, "Amontillado" 515). Insularity is not limiting in itself. As Bachelard claims, "the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (Bachelard 28). In "The Cask of Amontillado," the airless tomb does, in fact, intensify Montresor's dreaming and bring memory to the fore. The horror of the story lies in the perversion of that dreaming. The nostalgia of the daydream is replaced by the nightmare of family resentment and

revenge, yet the dream is just as focused—and just as fully, materially expressed—as Bachelard could imagine. What distinguishes Montresor from the narrator of “The Man of the Crowd” is the materiality of his city expertise. Where the narrator can only wander through a city which becomes more and more walled-in, Montresor builds walls himself. He does not simply experience urban structure but actively changes it. His expressions of the self are not limited to attention and reception of the city, but material impacts on it through the construction of walls. Montresor uses the structural forces of urban life to kill a fellow city dweller; the horror of entombment is partially bound up in the exaggeration and redirection of the city’s everyday elements. The interiority of the tomb, like that of the café, induces reflection on the space and contents of the city itself. Just as the narrator of “The Man of the Crowd” feels most confident in his navigation of the city from behind glass, Montresor’s memory—his recollection and confession of the crime (Poe 518)—revolves around the internal space of the tomb. “The Cask of Amontillado” also plays with similar themes of doubling. As the narrator of “The Man of the Crowd” loses track of his double, he admits that his neuroses must remain unexamined; Montresor, in contrast, actively represses his double.

Both of these Poe stories are centered on themes of light and flânerie. In “The Man of the Crowd,” the changing light reflects the narrator’s growing unease: his “happy mood” (Poe, “Crowd” 482) is at its strongest when daylight still reigns; his quiet but confident analysis takes place when “the lamps were well-lighted” (483); he begins descending into obsession as “the rays of the gas-lamps...gained ascendancy, and threw over every thing a fitful and garish luster” (487); his moment of deepest fear occurs in “the dim light of an accidental lamp” (491); and even as daylight reigns once again, it is darkened by his revelation into “the shades of the second evening” (492). The movement in “The Cask of Amontillado” from the carnival to “the white web-work which gleams from...cavern walls” (Poe, “Amontillado” 512) to Fortunato’s damp, dark tomb (516) obviously implies repression and imprisonment. But what exactly is the role of light in spiritual life? Of course, light illuminates; but the implication of illumination, especially in the context of the window, is unity. The window allows the whole of the universe to enter the safe and productive interior for contemplation, just as the narrator of “The Man of the Crowd” initially sees the crowd as an object and neatly categorizes its members. Yet this unity is false, or at least exaggerated. Light does not unify *everything*, subject and universe, but *a single thing* and its observer. This difference is key to the relationship between light and the flâneur. The space of the arcades, glass-roofed centers of commerce, in the development of the Parisian flâneur makes the role of light in this process evident. Light elevates each individual object to the realm of the mystical, where it becomes worthy of attention. A halo forms around the object of contemplation, and in turn the impression of that object echoes in the mind’s eye; at their highest expression, these impressions seem infinite. Thus, when Benjamin describes the arcades as “fairy grottoes” (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 564), the comparison is not merely descriptive. The illuminated object unifies with the subject, and this unity extends from the timeless present—the moment of arrest—into mythical time.

The horrific element of darkness in Poe, then, is not solely rooted in the victim’s isolation from the universe; it is rooted in the extension of the last-illuminated object. The “type and the genius of deep crime” (Poe, “Crowd” 492) does not fade into darkness but continues wandering in the daylight, and the mystery surrounding him extends infinitely into the future. Fortunato, in contrast, has nothing but darkness surrounding him; the last illuminated object he sees is the face of his murderer which will hover in his mind’s eye undisrupted until his death. Of course, darkness in itself is spiritually draining. Jacob Riis, surveying the misery of tenement life, focused on darkness as a public health issue (Riis 17; 19; 35; 135). Light, in Riis’s view, is intimately connected with air; air, in turn, is directly tied to health, as “foul air” (11) is often so suffocating as to be deadly. The way in which this suffocation works is, as always, bound up in the structure of urban space. The interior is meant to be a space of refuge and protection. Bachelard and Benjamin converged on the conception of the interior as a shell:

Here a man wants to live in a shell. He wants the walls that protect him to be as smoothly polished and as firm as if his sensitive flesh had to come in direct contact with them. *The shell confers a daydream of purely physical intimacy*... whenever life seeks to shelter, protect, cover, or hide itself, the imagination sympathizes with the protected space... Shade, too, can be inhabited. (Bachelard 149–51, italics added)

The original form of all dwelling is existence not in the house but in the shell. The shell bears the impression of its occupant. In the most extreme instance, the dwelling becomes a shell. The nineteenth century, like no other century, was addicted to dwelling. It conceived the residence as a receptacle for the person, and it encased him... What didn't the nineteenth century invent some sort of casing for! Pocket watches, slippers, egg cups, thermometers, playing cards... Today this world has disappeared entirely. (Benjamin, *Arcades Project* 220–1)

These passages align in their recognition of the paradoxical warming function of darkness. Night is, as in Poe, the realm of terror; yet it is also the realm of comfort, sleep, and dreams. As emphasized in the Bachelard excerpt, the loss of visual phenomena in the lightless shell pushes the subject to seek tactile comfort and intimacy (typically in bed). A dim interior is a place of refuge. The misery of the darkness which Riis documents is owed, in part, to a perversion of this idea. Darkness, in the tenements, is not insulation from the urban but imposition of the urban as the city cracks the shell and enters intimate life. As the foul conditions of 1890s New York seep in, the private sphere becomes porous and loses its sense of security; the presence of the entire city in one's home weakens the distinct unity of family life. In many cases, they seep in by way of materials. In Riis's most shocking photos, the interiors are not just dingy and poorly-lit, but constructed with the exact same materials and structures as the city outside. For example: a kitchen in Blindman's Alley (Riis 28) contains the exact same iron in its stove as one finds lining Bottle Alley (54); clothing typically belonging to the interior, as shown in an Elizabeth Street attic (181), is strung across Gotham Court (34) and Roosevelt Street (36) and made public; and the brick and wrought iron inside the Five Points House of Industry (145) and the Newsboys' Lodging House (156) are identical to the façades of buildings in Chinatown (77) and Hell's Kitchen (13). In other words, interior spaces should be distinguished from the exterior by cleanliness and controlled light, but are not. An unlikely but useful comparison is with the gazebo in a garden. The tenements Riis documents become indistinguishable from the misery of everyday urban poverty because, though they have a clear structure, they make no distinction between interior and exterior.

The parks of Frederick Law Olmsted are staunchly opposed to this urban homogeneity. He states directly that his aim in creating parks was to create "provisions...made expressly for recreation" (Olmsted, "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns" 626). Recreation, already, is at odds with the principles of design governing the tenements Riis surveys; those buildings are made cheaply, and life in them is structured around thrift and cost-reduction (Riis 66; 193). To negotiate with these principles of thrift, Olmsted justifies his vision in material terms—pointing out that "air is disinfected by sunlight and foliage. Foliage also acts mechanically to purify the air by screening it" (Olmsted, "Public Parks" 622)—and in spiritual terms—noting that in parks, one can "see vast numbers of persons brought closely together, poor and rich, young and old, Jew and Gentile" (627), which exemplifies and strengthens the democratic project. Yet the insistence on dedicating space to leisure is radical. Even more radical is his introduction of nature into the city. Olmsted discusses the existing natural elements of the city:

Would trees, for seclusion and shade and beauty be out of place, for instance, by the side of certain of our streets? It will, perhaps, appear to you that it is hardly necessary to ask such a question... Unfortunately they are so seldom planted as to have fairly settled the question of the desirableness of systematically maintaining trees under these circumstances... If each [tree] were given the proper capacity... a very great number of people might be placed under influences counteracting those with which we desire to contend. (Olmsted, "Public Parks" 632)

As with his emphasis on recreation, Olmsted encourages changes to the city which are reasonable but not based on economic principles and purposes. What distinguishes this discussion of trees is the importance of everyday life, the beautification of the ordinary. The similarities to flânerie, with its regular exhibition of the illuminated object, are clear. Urban nature, like the object of the flâneur, roots itself in the urban psyche through phantasmagoria, i.e., through the presentation of images which—as with images in dreams—seem infinite to the enthralled attention then quickly pass by. Benjamin argues that in the “timeless little squares” of Paris, “the trees hold sway” (Benjamin, *Arcades Project* 516). He is right to say trees hold sway over the city; but it must be clarified that they follow urban logic and are not discrete, privileged components of the urban landscape.

The tree-lined street operates under the principles of urban phantasmagoria which are, in turn, dictated by the structure of walls. The word “phantasmagoria” comes from the “Fantasmagorie,” a séance-esque show which used the magic lantern—the “predecessor to today’s slide projector” (Barber 73)—to rapidly present images of skeletons, phantoms, monsters, and real people (living or dead) in an otherwise dark and smoky room (78–80). The tree-lined streets which Olmsted describes follow the logic of the “Fantasmagorie.” Urban images (people, arcade commodities, trees) follow the projector’s rhythm of obscurity and revelation. The wall blocks the subject’s view until the image appears, all at once, from behind it. The beauty of Olmsted’s trees is based on their play with the faculty of attention. Each tree stands alone and occupies the subject’s entire field of view, just like the spectral images of the “Fantasmagorie.” The subject’s attention is arrested by the tree. Benjamin described this arrest of attention, which is only possible when the object has a definite “presence in time and space, [a] unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” 220) as the aura of the object. In the moment of arrested attention, the subject and object seem to exist outside time. This timelessness, a sense of elevated awareness and fixation, is made horrific in “The Man of the Crowd.” Yet Poe’s story fails to portray its unremarkability.

The urban phantasmagoria is significant not because it induces transcendence or paranoia, but because it is a structural element of everyday life. This is a consequence of two facts about city life: there is a high density of people and things which are unusual in the daily life of the subject; and the city is filled with walls, which obscure the atypical until it is presented as an image which completely occupies the subject’s field of view. At the turn of every corner, the opening of every door, the crossing of every street, a novel image is revealed and induces momentary arrest of attention. The rhythm of obscurity, revelation, and disappearance is central to urban life. Every tree lining the streets which Olmsted describes is an image of nature, and so—as with the “grass-seeds” at the end of “Bartleby”—becomes an avenue by which nature enters the urban. But this is a two-way avenue; nature enters the urban, and urban rhythms control nature. In nature itself, the subject approaches the object; therefore, they can control their proximity to the object and how it is presented to them. City walls render urban elements, whether natural, human, or manmade, into a constant phantasmagoria which might be called a sequence of minor epiphanies.

It should be noted that these epiphanies are so minor, so everyday, that they become negligible. Olmsted’s trees and the human beings of the city crowd are similar to each other but unique in time and space. Therefore, they retain their novelty and significance. However, being everyday objects, one associates them in a single subconscious category and cheapens their unique position in time and space. Benjamin argues that to reproduce is “to pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura” (Benjamin, “The Work of Art” 223). Categorization achieves the same result through inverse means. Reproduction robs the singular object of significance by distributing it through time and space, making it transitory; categorization robs the common object of significance by severing it from its individual position. Categorization is also the basis of the blasé attitude which Simmel describes, as it allows the city dweller to live as though they had seen and experienced everything in the city. A clear disparity emerges here between the everyday beauty of the tree-lined street and Central Park,

work for which Olmsted is best known. Part of the philosophy governing the Park is its separation from the city. Olmsted acknowledges the distance of the park from the daily life of most people: “for practical every-day purposes to the great mass of the people, the Park might as well be a hundred miles away” (Olmsted, “Public Parks” 644). He addresses the controversy of such a distance directly:

A wise forecast of the future gave the proposed park the name of Central. Our present chief magistrate...warned his coadjutors, in his inaugural message, to expect a great and rapid movement of population toward the parts of the island adjoining the Central Park. A year hence, five city railroads will bring passengers as far up as the park, if not beyond it. (Olmsted, “The Greensward Plan” 167)

Olmsted’s vision of the expansion of New York has proven correct. The gap which appeared to separate the city dweller from his park has been closed. Yet there is another, more significant gap between the city and the park. While the tree-lined streets discussed above follow the logic of phantasmagoria, a governing principle of city life, Central Park operates on its own principles. In his plan for the park, Olmsted notes that “the horizon lines of the upper park are bold and sweeping and the slopes have great breadth in almost every aspect in which they may be contemplated” (165) and that work in the lower park will aim “to afford facilities for rest and leisurely contemplation upon the rising ground opposite” (166). In other words, one goal of the entire park is to provide a space for free contemplation. At first glance, this aim seems to dovetail nicely with the idea of aura put forth by Benjamin:

The concept of aura which was proposed above with reference to historical objects may be illustrated with reference to the aura of *natural ones*. We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. (Benjamin, “The Work of Art” 222–3, italics added)

Central Park, built for distant contemplation, would seem to possess this aura. Contemplation, like aura and the phantasmagoria, is based on the subject’s static point of view. Yet further elaboration on the idea of aura and its relationship to phantasmagoria reveals that the similarity is only passing. Three qualities distinguish the phantasmagoric image: its rapid appearance and disappearance; its dominance of the subject’s senses; and its timelessness, the arrest of attention which makes the momentary glimpse feel much longer. These qualities do not imbue it with aura. It does not possess the aura of the artwork, which is drawn from ritual value and situation in a historical tradition (223–4); nor does it possess the aura of the natural object, which requires “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.” The phantasmagoric object does not appear distant, but immediate; it shocks the subject with its rapid appearance and domination of the visual senses.

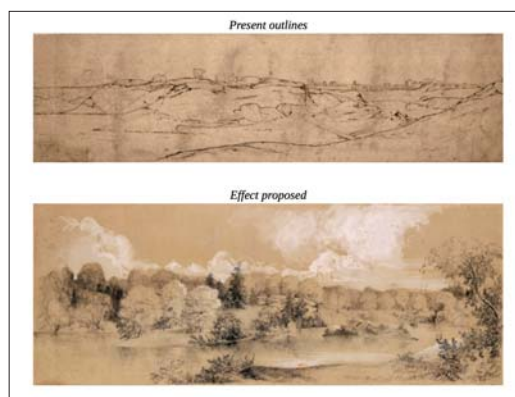


Figure 2. Frederick Law Olmsted & Calvert Vaux, “Greensward Study No. 1: View North across Pond from near Entrance at 59th Street and Fifth Avenue,” 1858. (Olmsted, *Writings* 943)



Figure 3. Frederick Law Olmsted, “Greensward Study No. 4: View Northeast toward Vista Rock,” 1858. (Olmsted, *Writings* 946)

Yet one could say that the object of phantasmagoria mimics aura. For a moment, it seems to extend infinitely in time and space. Further, as emphasized above, Benjamin’s example depicts the aura of a *natural object*, not of nature itself. Phantasmagoria, like aura, deals with objects and images; there is no “space” of phantasmagoria, for the fact that it emerges from space, announces itself, then returns to space is crucial. Nature is spatial. Therefore it has no unique presence in time and space, as the aura-imbued object must. Thus Central Park, which recreates the broad and irregular natural landscape (Figures 2, 3), does not join the system of urban objects as the trees lining streets do. This natural quality of space makes the Park discrete from its city and from the European tradition of landscape architecture, to whose regularity Olmsted was averse (Olmsted, “Report of the Landscape Architects and Superintendents” 661–2; Gopnik 101–2). Rather, the Park fosters a sense of place and scale which is completely discrete from the rhythm of urban life. Olmsted touches on this directly, writing:

We want, especially, the greatest possible contrast with the restraining and confining conditions of the town, those conditions which compel us to walk circumspectly, watchfully, jealously, which compel us to look closely upon others without sympathy. Practically, what we most want is a simple, broad, open space of clean greensward, with sufficient play of surface and a sufficient number of trees about it to supply a variety of light and shade. This we want as a central feature. (Olmsted, “Public Parks” 632)

In this excerpt, Olmsted’s views on city life pass out of the critical and into the contemptuous. He brings the worst aspects of *flânerie* to the fore. The object of his most severe criticism is the rhythm of urban life. As Olmsted notes, the walled-in nature of the city focuses everything into individual images; the rapid appearance of these images constitutes the urban phantasmagoria. One can distinguish that the flash of the urban image, its spasm into the visual field, is the “shock factor” of urban life which Benjamin posits as central to the loneliness of the city dweller (Benjamin, “On Some Motifs” 163). The “shock” can be beautiful, but it amplifies everyday strangeness and makes it seem inescapable. This is clear as Poe’s jostling, gesticulating crowd becomes inhuman (Poe, “Crowd” 483). Significantly, Poe’s inhuman crowd is not seen as a single entity, but as a procession of “individual faces” (487). Everyday urban life is built on the procession of discrete images, each posing a possible psychic threat. Thus the city dweller develops the blasé attitude as a “shock defense” (Benjamin, “On Some Motifs” 163) in anticipation of these threats.

Olmsted’s Park and Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” neatly reinforce each other. Poe depicts the horror of the *flâneur*, the endless urgency induced by the “shock factor” of phantasmagoria; Central Park is meant as a space of relaxed and thoughtful contemplation. The differences between the two can be understood in terms of light. As discussed above, the implications of illumination in Poe’s story are false. The café window implies that the whole of the universe enters the safe, interior space

as an object of analysis; therefore, it implies an equality between the subject and object as fellow occupants of the city. In reality, the window creates a spiritual separation between subject and object—not entirely negatively, since the window functions as a “shock defense”—which goes ignored by virtue of its physical invisibility. Jean Baudrillard, though describing a much later context, says rightly:

Advertising calls [glass] “the material of the future”—a future which, as we all know, will itself be “transparent.” Glass is thus both the material used and the ideal to be achieved, both end and means. So much for metaphysics... Whether as packaging, window, or partition, glass is the basis of transparency without transition: we see, but cannot touch... the modern “house of glass” does not open onto the outside at all; instead *it is the outside world, nature, landscape, that penetrates...* the whole world thus becomes integrated *as spectacle into the domestic universe.* (Baudrillard 41–4, italics added)

This discussion of glass speaks directly to Poe’s café window. The narrator’s analysis of the crowd is directional, instrumental, and conscious. Therefore, he believes himself to be in control of the crowd as an abstract object, allowing it into the interior and categorizing it neatly. As his glimpse of “the type and the genius of deep crime” (Poe, “Crowd” 492) reveals, and as emphasized in the Baudrillard excerpt, the universe enters the interior of its own accord. Yet the window offers some “shock defense” by filtering the intrusion of the world into a comprehensible procession of images:

The wild effects of the light enchained me to an examination of individual faces; and although the rapidity with which the world of light flitted before the window, prevented me from casting more than a glance upon each visage, still it seemed that, in my then peculiar mental state, I could frequently read, even in that brief interval of a glance, the history of long years. (Poe, “Crowd” 487)

Poe’s vision is phantasmagoria in its purest form, connected to Baudrillard’s recognition of “the whole world integrated as spectacle” and to the spectral images of the original Fantasmagorie; it is what Olmsted sees as “those conditions which compel us to walk circumspectly, watchfully, jealously, which compel us to look closely upon others without sympathy.” The light of Poe’s London is divided across the rapid procession of nightmarish images.

The key difference between Poe and Olmsted resides in light. Olmsted’s repeated insistence on “leisurely contemplation” requires daylight; he was hesitant to allow any portions of Central Park to be open at night (Olmsted, “Greensward Plan” 169) and wrote that “no part of [Prospect Park] is designed with reference to use after nightfall” (Olmsted, “Report” 670). Although he wishes to “supply a variety of light and shade” (Olmsted, “Public Parks” 632), his emphasis on natural openness lends itself to the exact unity of subject and object which Poe’s narrator falsely recognizes. This unity is not equal—nature is not presented as an object of analysis, a fellow inhabitant, but as a space surrounding the subject—but the subject is integrated with nature. Olmsted intended Central Park to be a mixture of park and playground, with the “park” as essentially mental space of contemplation, undirected thought, and “pleasurable wakefulness of the mind without stimulating exertion” (Olmsted, “Public Parks” 628–9) and the “playground” as essentially physical, allowing unrestricted engagement with one’s body.

Recreation is, for Olmsted, a celebration of the human being as an animal. He acknowledges that “purely gregarious recreation seems to be generally looked upon... as childish and savage, because, I suppose, there is so little of what we call intellectual gratification in it” (626); through Central Park, he challenges that assumption by celebrating the natural in mankind. The Park channels the exact same “somatic intelligence” upon which Poe’s narrator relies to navigate the crowd. Olmsted places a high value on unconscious somatic intelligence:

We all act much and often most wisely on opinions... that have come to us through no process of thought that we can recall. We say, while engaged in conversation, that we think thus and so, not having been aware of such thought until it was passing our lips. Much that we call tact, sense, genius, inspiration, instinct, is of this unconscious process. (Olmsted, “Trees in Streets and in Parks” 776)

In the city, somatic intelligence is unconscious but expressed in conscious life through its role in navigation. The urban dweller relies on instinct. Somatic intelligence can fail and disorient the subject; disorientation in the city can be annoying or even frightening as it disrupts the urgent flow of city life. Further, if the subject is directly inhibited by the urban phantasmagoria—materially expressed in the living wall of Poe’s crowd—horror emerges, as the human being can no longer trust their own body. But Olmsted recognizes that recreation, engagement with somatic intelligence, is “a distinct requirement of all human beings...health-giving to body, mind, and soul” (Olmsted, “Public Parks” 628). This need to engage with the body is crucial to Central Park, and is found in the joys of getting lost. As Gopnik notes, navigating the park is tricky (Gopnik 102). But the difficulty of navigating the Park does not feel like a somatic failure, as in the city. Rather, it reinforces that the Park is separate from frantic city life. The unity of nature which Central Park aims to recreate is not built on the rapid procession of images but on the contemplation of a whole. One may feel disoriented in their wanderings through the Park, but one never feels lost or as though they are in the wrong place; every section of the Park feels connected to the same natural whole. Of course, certain areas are distinct—as proven by the gorgeous chromolithographs in Louis Prang’s *Central Park Album*, each depicting a discrete, labeled portion of the Park (Prang 2-13)—but even these separate scenes fit snugly into one another.



Figure 4. Otto Wagner, “Drawing of an Air Center,” Vienna 1911 (Schorske 99)

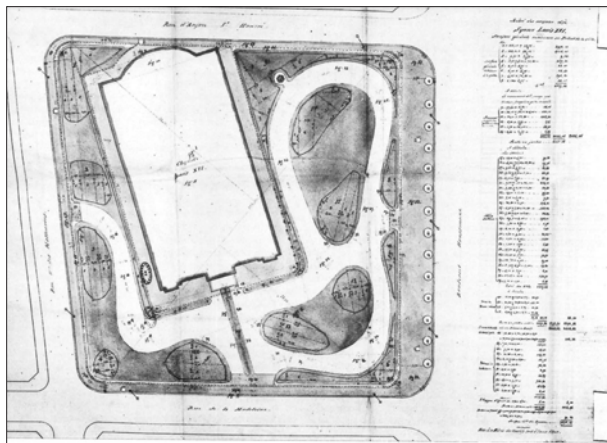


Figure 5. Jean-Pierre Barillet-Deschamps, “Project for the Square Louis XVI,” Paris 1857-1862 (Limido 136)

The Park is cohesive, “planned [like a] fresco, with constant consideration of exterior objects, some of them quite at a distance and even existing as yet only in the imagination” (Olmsted, “Public Parks” 635); this cohesion allows for the unbroken expression of the human body. Unbroken somatic expression is not intrinsic to natural park spaces, nor is it intrinsic to unified spaces. This fact is made obvious by many European parks. In the “air centers” of Otto Wagner—whose motto, *Artis sola domina necessitas* governed a vision for a rapidly expanding Vienna (Schorske 73)—the park’s inhabitants are scarcely visible (Figure 4). The lines of trees and greenery, which resemble the folding screen in “Bartleby” more than any forest, shape nature into the image of technology. The work of Jean-Baptiste Barillet-Deschamps, the chief landscape architect under Baron Haussmann during his renovations of Paris, has a similar effect (Figure 5). Nature is made to mimic the city. As Olmsted notes, “the liking for detached scenic effects which might be suitable for framing, or for the background of a ballet . . . influences most French landscape work” (Olmsted, “Report” 662). These spaces may be beautiful, but they are designed for contemplation in the purely intellectual sense; the body has no place. The idea of giving people room to play and express innate somatic intelligence finds expression, as so many themes of urban design do, in the work of Benjamin. Discussing film, he writes:

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action [*Spielraum*]. (Benjamin, “The Work of Art” 236)

Harry Zohn’s translation of *Spielraum* as “field of action” is appropriate but flexible; it can mean “room to move,” “scope,” or “leeway.” Dana Cooley seizes the opportunity to translate *Spielraum* as “playroom” and frames it as “a space for training our faculties” (Cooley 103). Her recognition that “in conceiving of cinema as a *Spielraum* . . . Benjamin celebrates its capacity for bodily engagement” (104) extends beyond film. The “playroom” of the Park pushes people to engage with the familiar in terms of materials: the stone in the Park’s walls (Olmsted, “Greensward Plan” 168), the flowers in its gardens (179), and the trees in its arboretum (187) can all be recognized in New York itself. Just as the “playroom” of the cinema “extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives,” the *Spielraum* of the park reframes the everyday expressions of nature (e.g., the trees along a street). When the city dweller sees natural elements in their full, cohesive expression, they learn to recognize those elements in their everyday life as microcosms of nature. Play is an exercise in fantasy; it is distinctly opposed to the functional and the logical. The *Spielraum* of the park works fantastically. It elevates the natural image, which is common and scattered throughout the city, to the significance of natural space, which is unified and discrete from the city.



Figure 6. Otto Wagner, “Unter-Döbling Station,” 1895–1896 (Schorske 80)

In this respect, Olmsted's parks are the inverse of the Riis's tenements. In the latter, the urban landscape cracks the shell of the home and imposes itself on intimate life through the materials of the interior; in the former, the natural blooms from its minor forms within the urban and the unified beauty of nature emerges in the fantasy of the flâneur. The similarity to the "grass-seeds" in Melville's story, whose significance emerges from a small source, is evident. Urban nature exists within the walls of the city, and operates on the same principles of phantasmagoria by which manmade elements, and fellow human beings, are exhibited to the city dweller. But nature, by the "strange magic" of fantasy, acts simultaneously as a discrete image and as the idea of a spatial unity. The natural object possesses the quasi-aura of the phantasmagoria, seeming to bring the subject outside of time through the arrest of attention; it also implies natural space, as the subject momentarily feels as though they are situated in the park. This dual action is not limited to natural elements. The misery of the city's imposition in Riis is based on the same fantastic illusion of being situated in another space. This illusion is the basis of revivalist architecture, which echoes earlier forms to imply their spaces and ideals; it also finds expression in details, such as Wagner's use of iron, ordinarily a functional material, to mimic a railway and unify the form of railway station with its function (Figure 6). Above, it was argued that the basis of phantasmagoria and the urban "shock" is novelty and uniqueness in time and space. This is true, but the urban rhythm of obscurity and revelation is also connected to familiarity. One's attention can be arrested by a familiar face, an unexpected similarity between buildings, the recognition of a street name, the signs of changing seasons which repeat each year. The images of urban life move quickly, capturing attention and disappearing. As the city dweller learns to recognize them as part of daily life, how they echo through each other across the urban landscape, they become familiar; as they become familiar, the city dweller develops a friendship with them; in this friendship, they become beautiful.

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Is What We See in the Picture the Same as What the Picture Presents?

ALBERTO VOLTOLINI

Introduction

In this paper, first, I want to claim that, if an experience of *seeing-in* is a *substantively* cognitively penetrated form of perceptual experience, as Wollheim (2003a) claimed, then *pace* Brown (2010) and Hopkins (1998:chap.6,2003:161), what one sees in the picture not merely matches, but properly coincides with what the picture presents, i.e., its *figurative* content. Secondly, I also want to claim that this coincidence does not mean that seeing-in turns out to be either a form of mental imagery or a form of imagination, paradigmatically socially-based (typically in terms of make-believe games), as some people have claimed (Walton 1990, Dorsch 2016). For, by expanding what Wollheim said on this concern, I will stress that a seeing-in experience is a *sui generis* perceptual experience, notably, a properly fusional *twofold* perceptual experience, in which the configuration fold (CF) constrains the recognitional fold (RF) as regards their respective contents. (Wollheim grasped this point only partially, in his mere talking of such folds as inseparable: 1987:46).

The architecture of this paper is the following. In Section 1, I argue for the basically unitarianist idea that what one sees in a picture coincides with what the picture presents, the *Marriage approach* in Hopkins' (1998:128) terminology. In Section 2, I claim that this coincidence does not undermine the perceptual character of the seeing-in experience, although *sui generis*.

1. An Argument in Favor of Marriagism

For Wollheim (1980,1987,1998,2003a,2003b), a seeing-in experience is a *sui generis* twofold yet genuine perceptual experience. For it is made out of two different folds, the *configurational fold* (CF), in which one perceptually grasps the picture's *vehicle*, the physical basis of a picture, and the *recognitional fold* (RF), in which one perceptually grasps the scene that a picture presents (Nanay 2022), which Wollheim takes as identical with the picture's *subject*. As Wollheim (1987:46) said, this distinctive character of the seeing-in experience has to do with the fact that neither fold coincides with the corresponding perceptual experience, either of the picture's vehicle or of the picture's subject, taken in isolation. So, entertaining this experience amounts to entertaining a proper *fusion* experience, in which the two folds are interpenetrated (Voltolini 2020a): "[t]he two folds occur simultaneously, as part of an integrated whole" (Hopkins 2003:161).

Now, two examples provided by Wollheim himself (2003b) contribute to raise the question as to whether what one sees in a picture not merely matches, but properly coincides with what the picture presents, the picture's subject in Wollheim's terms; as one may further qualify it, the *figurative* content of a picture. I merely speak of figurative content, not of *depictive* (or representational) content, to take into account the case of *pareidolias*, i.e., items that are not pictorial representations viz. *depictions*, yet allow for a proper seeing-in experience. In the classical examples Wollheim borrows from Leonardo, pareidolias are experientially affected by seeing-in in one's looking "at damp-

stained walls or at stones or broken colour and discern there scenes of battle or violent action and mysterious landscapes” (1980:145). Thus, although pareidolias are not depictions because they are not representations of something, they have figurative content just as depictions, while however failing to have depictive content, unlike depictions themselves.

As regards the above question, the first example is Matisse’s *The Green Stripe*, a pictorial representation of Matisse’s wife (in front of a multicolored background) (Fig. 1). The second example is Parmigianino’s *Madonna with the Long Neck*, a classical pictorial representation of Virgin Mary with her child (in a crowd of people) (Fig. 2).

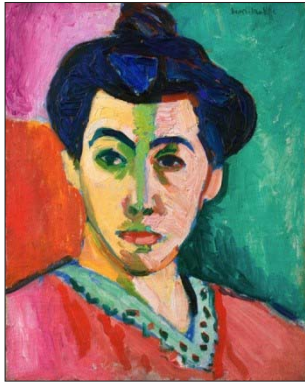


Fig. 1. (from Artchive)



Fig. 2. (from Artstor)

For *marriagists*, let me so call those who defend the Marriage approach, what one sees in these pictures not merely matches, but properly coincides with what these pictures respectively present; namely, first, the face and the chest of an ordinary woman on a multicolored background, and second, a hieratic woman holding her child on her knees while being adored by a crowd of people. *Pace* Hopkins’ (2003:161) reservations, Wollheim himself (2003b) seems to endorse this approach. Definitely, for him the two paintings have an ordinary figurative content: “[w]hen Parmigianino painted the Madonna with a long neck, the Madonna whom he represented is not, despite the title given to his picture, a longnecked Madonna. When Matisse painted a stroke of green down his wife’s face, he was not representing a woman who had a green line down her face.” (2003b:143). Since for him the figurativity of a picture is fixed by the relevant seeing-in experience, one may plausibly guess that for him, the ordinary figurative contents that the paintings respectively present match or even coincide with what one sees in the respective seeing-in experiences.¹ Wittgenstein is perhaps even more explicit on this concern. In the black-and-white photo of some individuals, he says, “I saw [...] a boy with slicked-back blond hair and a dirty light-coloured jacket, and a man with dark hair, standing in front of a machine which was made in part of castings painted black, and in part of finished, smooth axles, gears, etc., and next to it a grating made of light galvanized wire. The finished iron parts were iron coloured, the boy’s hair was blond, the castings black, the grating zinc-coloured, despite the fact that everything was depicted simply in lighter and darker shades of the photographic paper.” (1977:III§117)

For *separatists* instead, those who defend the *Separation account* (Brown 2010, Hopkins 1998:128, 2003), the answer to that question is instead the opposite. For them, the situation with such pictures is just like the one that, *pace* Wittgenstein, affects black-and-white pictures. What one sees in all these pictures respectively – certain black-and-white scenes, a green-striped female face standing on her chest, a long-necked lady with a baby and some people around – differs from what the picture presents – normally colored scenarios, the face and the chest of an ordinary distinguished lady, a hieratic lady with her child faced by some people around.²

In order to address the question, note immediately that with pareidolias, the situation is the same. In the following case, do we see a human face in the Martian rocks that the pareidolia also presents, or is such a face merely what the pareidolia presents, since what we effectively see in such rocks is rather a para-human face (Fig. 3)?



Fig. 3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cydonia_\(Mars\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cydonia_(Mars))

Moreover, focusing on pareidolias is relevant for our present purposes. For the fact that the problem may arise also as regards pareidolias shows that a certain way to interpret Separatism must be immediately discarded. For some people, instead of talking of a picture as merely involving the two items respectively mobilized by the two folds of the seeing-in experience, i.e., the picture's vehicle and the picture's subject viz. its figurative content, a third item must be involved as well; namely, the picture's *Sujet*, i.e., what the picture is about, its depictive content (Husserl 2006, Wiesing 2010, Voltolini 2015, Nanay 2018, Kulvicki 2020). In the above examples of Matisse and Parmigianino, the respective *Sujets* of such pictures are M.me Matisse and the Virgin Mary with Jesus. Yet in their not being depictions, i.e., in their failing to be pictorial representations of something, pareidolias lack a *Sujet*. Hence, one cannot reinterpret in the wake of Separatism the difference between what one sees in a picture and

what the picture presents as a difference between what one sees in the picture taken as being the same as what the picture presents, on the one hand, and what the picture is about on the other hand (Husserl 2006, Nanay 2018). For as I said, the problem exemplified by Wollheim's examples and also by the Wittgenstein's one may also arise with pareidolias, which however lack aboutness, as we have just seen.

But once we put the *Sujet* aside, who is right between marriagists and separatists? In what follows, I will put forward an argument in favor of Marriagism, which is in line with things that Wollheim said on this concern.

The argument runs as follows. If what one sees in the relevant pictures differed from what the pictures present, as separatists claim, one would see odd things in such pictures. For example, in Matisse's case, in his picture one would see a woman with a green-striped face (in front of a multicolored background), while in Parmigianino's case, one would see a long-necked woman (along with other people). One may call such things *aliens*, by admittedly using this word metaphorically. Yet unlike *other* cases, one does not see aliens in the above pictures. Indeed, there is a difference between the case of such pictures and the case of other pictures in which one really sees aliens. This difference has to do with how one *completes* what one sees in a picture. Hence, what one sees in such pictures coincides with what those pictures present.

To prove my point, compare the difference between these two pictures (Figs. 4-5).

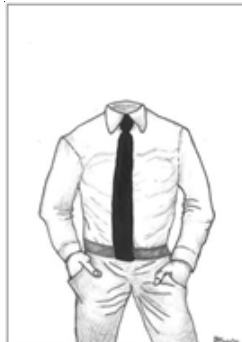


Fig. 4. (by courtesy of Paola Tosti)



Fig. 5. (by courtesy of Paola Tosti)

In Fig. 4, one sees an alien masculine beheaded body on a white background. Yet in Fig. 5, one does not see a beheaded alien on a white background; instead, one sees an ordinary masculine body on that background. For one opportunely *completes*³ what one sees in the picture, by adding to it something that corresponds to no painted areas of the picture. This difference corresponds to the difference between the *commitments* one endorses while seeing such pictures (Block 1983, Lopes 1996:118). For such commitments show how what one sees in a picture must be completed. As regards the first picture, one is committed to the (presented) *absence* of the head of a masculine body: in the picture, one sees a beheaded masculine body.⁴ While as regards the second picture, one is committed to the (presented) *presence* of the head of a masculine body: in the picture, one sees a masculine body ordinarily having a head on its top. Granted, performing such a completion does not mean that all details concerning what one sees in the picture viz. what the picture presents, i.e., its subject, must be filled. Indeed, there are pictorial details to which one is *inexplicitly not committed*, in the sense that “[i]f it does not go into the matter of *F*-ness, [the picture] is ‘inexplicitly non-committal’ with respect to *F*” (Lopes 1996:118). For example, as regards that picture, one is implicitly non-committed to whether the (presented) head is haired.⁵ Likewise, as regards the first picture, on the one hand one is committed to the *presence* of the (presented) body’s lower parts of the legs. Yet on the other hand, one is inexplicitly not committed as regards e.g. the (presented) legs’ length. All in all, in both cases what one sees in the pictures coincides with what such pictures present: definitely an alien (among some other things) in the first case, but an ordinary individual (among some other things) in the second case. Now, in allowing one to see in the picture what it presents; namely, an ordinary subject, not an alien one, this second case is perfectly analogous to both the Matisse and the Parmigianino cases, which prompted separatists to postulate – erroneously, to my mind – a difference between what one sees in the picture and what the picture presents. Ditto for the case of a black-and-white picture. As Wittgenstein expressly claimed, in his example, due to the shade contrasts occurring in that picture’s vehicle, one is committed to the color of the (presented) boy’s hair, although one is implicitly non-committed e.g. to the (presented) boy’s particular age.

What I have said precisely accords with what Wollheim meant by saying that one of the features of the seeing-in experience is that such an experience infringes the *localization requirement*: there may be no parts of an *x* in which an *y* is seen in it, since the *x* is not cropped to the contours of its subject (1980:141,150-1). According to Wollheim, one of the cases showing that seeing-in does not fulfill such a requirement occurs when what one sees in the picture viz. what the picture presents is cut off by the frame (*ib.*), which is precisely what happens with Fig. 5. In Wollheim’s example, this is shown by Rosselli’s *Way to Calvary* (Fig. 6), in which, for example, the presented cross one sees in it is partially cut off by the frame. By looking at it, hardly anyone is obsessed by the thought of how the poor guy might have been crucified via by the ‘alien’ short cross one allegedly sees in the picture. For in it, anyone sees an ordinary longer cross instead.



Fig. 6. https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rosselli_Cosimo,_Cristo_spoliato_delle_sue_vesti,_Salita_di_Cristo_al_monte_Calvario,_15383_39729_gw.jpg

Of course, if what one sees in the picture coincides with what the picture presents, marriageists must alternatively account for the difference that separatists want to locate by distinguishing between the two things. For the marriageist, that difference mobilizes the *picture’s vehicle* as being different in a relevant sense from what one sees in the picture viz. what the picture presents. While entertaining a seeing-in experience, in seeing the vehicle in the CF of that experience, one may certainly see colors and shapes that differ from the colors and shapes that are grasped and attributed to the picture’s subject while seeing it in the RF of that

experience. To begin with, as for a black-and-white picture, in the CF of the relevant seeing-in experience one sees black-and-white patches as scattered across the picture's vehicle, while in the RF of that experience one sees ordinarily colored scenes constituting what the picture presents. As is proved by the fact that, if that picture changed its colors by turning its black-and-white patches into faded ones, in the seeing-in experience this change would be attributed to the vehicle, in its CF, not to the picture's subject in its RF. For that subject would remain identical.⁶ Ditto for the Matisse and the Parmigianino cases. In Matisse's painting, green is instantiated in (a certain area of) its vehicle seen in the CF of its seeing-in experience, not by the presented face, while in Parmigianino's painting the stretched line is instantiated in (a certain area of) its vehicle seen in the CF of its seeing-in experience, not by the presented neck.

At this point, on behalf of separatists one may ask to the marriagist what justifies their idea that what one sees in the relevant picture is an ordinary object, not an alien one. Perhaps, separatists might go on saying, this may happen in cases like those pointed out by the Matisse and the Parmigianino cases. But how can this be the case with a stick figure, as in the case (Fig. 7) of this picture of the former US President Donald Trump, which is patently taken as a sort of caricature of him (Hopkins 1998:124,128)?



Fig. 7. (by courtesy of Paola Tosti)

Or, to put it alternatively, why is it that in Fig. 5 we do not see an alien body, just as is admittedly the case in Fig. 4?

On behalf of Wollheim, the answer lies in the idea that the seeing-in experience is *substantively* cognitively penetrated, in particular with respect to its RF. By “substantively cognitively penetrated”, I do not mean the facile thesis that the conceptual content of the cognitive central states of a system somehow affects the RF of a seeing-in experience. Instead, I mean the more demanding thesis that the RF of that experience i) has a conceptual content grounded in the cognitive central states of a system;⁷ ii) that affects the process underlying that experience as a whole – in other words, such a conceptual import does not merely qualify what some people call a *post-perceptual* phase of a perceptual experience, as on the contrary it admittedly happens with ordinary perceptual experiences (Pylyshyn 2003, Raftopoulos 2009), but it constitutes the content of the RF of

a seeing-in experience. As Wollheim glosses: “whatever credence we might give to the role of modularity in perception in general, there is obviously a level of complexity above which it doesn’t apply, and there is reason to think that picture perception lies outside its scope” (2003a:10).

That such a substantive cognitive penetration affects the seeing-in’s RF is shown by the fact that, such a penetration explains the aforementioned commitments occurring in the relevant seeing-in experiences. Let me start with black-and-white pictures. It is because one knows that ordinary objects and persons are colored that, as Wittgenstein stressed, one sees colored items in the RF of the relevant seeing-in experiences with such pictures. If one did not have that knowledge, one might well see alien black-and-white items in such pictures. Likewise for the case with Wollheim’s own example of Rosselli’s painting. It is because we independently know the crucifixion story that we see an ordinarily long cross in the condemned’s hands. If we didn’t know that story, we might take the picture as presenting a shorter cross. Ditto with the Matisse and the Parmigianino cases. It is because one knows how human being normally look like that one sees the face of an ordinary distinguished lady in the first picture and the neck of an ordinary hieratic lady in the second picture. If one did not have that knowledge, one might well see a green striped face in the first picture and an elongated neck in the second picture.

Curiously enough, in this respect pareidolias are on a par with pictures. If one didn’t know how Catholic religious authorities are normally dressed, one could hardly say that one sees a papal silhouette in this arrangement of flames (Fig. 8).

Moreover, that the RF of seeing-in experience is substantively cognitively penetrated can be proved utterly independently of the pictorial cases that marriagists interpret as showing that what one sees in a picture coincides with what the picture presents. In fact, if one could not mobilize the relevant concepts, no RF would emerge in one's perception. As this example from Matisse again (Fig. 9) shows.



Fig. 8. <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2007/oct/19/poles-see-john-paul-ii-in-bonfire-photo/>



Fig. 9. (from Artstor)

As regards this Matissean painting, one can perceive certain elements in front of some other elements; thus, a certain 3D-grouping, i.e., a certain figure/ground segmentation, is grasped in that perception. Yet it is unclear whether one can see anything in this 3D-grouping distribution, so as to have a proper twofold seeing-in experience of this painting. For it is unclear whether one possesses suitable concepts that would help to see a scene in that painting as what it would present.⁸

2. Seeing-in Is Genuinely Perceptual, not Imaginative

So far, so good. Yet at this point a different question arises. If in order to justify the coincidence between what one sees in a picture and what the picture presents one must hold that the RF of a seeing-in experience is substantively cognitively penetrated, what distinguishes it from a form of visually-based mental imagery or anyway of imagination, paradigmatically a form of socially-based imagination articulated in make-believe games, typically one in which one makes believe that the perception of the picture's vehicle is the perception of the picture's subject (Walton 1973, 1990, Dorsch 2016)? Granted, in the former case mental imagery floats free. Yet in the latter case, as Walton has been insisting, imagination is grounded, even socially, in the properties that qualify the perception of the vehicle. For whatever is imaginatively true in a socially shared make-believe game of the picture's subject depends on what is really true of the picture's vehicle. So, if it is really true that the vehicle has certain colors and shapes, it is make-believedly true that the subject has an individual of a certain kind endowed with corresponding colors and shapes.

Granted, Wollheim straightforwardly rejected this imaginative option in its first variant, the one appealing to mental imagery. For, he says, seeing a subject in a picture is unlike the activity of mentally imagining something in front of something else, as in the case of Rorschach tests (1980:138). For example, to see a bat in Durer's 1522 picture is unlike to mentally imagine a bat by virtue of seeing a certain patches on a canvas having certain colors and shapes.

Yet in order to stress the difference between the two cases, Wollheim's appeals to the fact that in the latter case there is no standard of correctness, as set by the author's intention (*ib.*). But this move is not enough to utterly dismiss an imaginative account of seeing-in, at least of its RF, by sticking to the second variant of the option, i.e., the make-believe account of imagination. For, as we have seen before, pareidolias also lack a standard of correctness, yet they are affected by a proper seeing-in experience.

So, here is another reason to show that, as regards its RF, seeing-in is not a form of imagination. On the one hand, seeing the Rorschach figure may prompt one not only to freely mentally imagine, but also to groundedly make-believedly see not only a bat, but also a butterfly or whatever else. For the grounding relation holding in make-believe is simply a dependence relation of what is imaginatively true on what is really true. If it is really true that one sees so and so (namely, certain features of the picture's vehicle), it is imaginatively true that one sees such and such (namely, certain features of the picture's subject, whatever they are). Yet on the other hand, seeing in the CF of a seeing-in experience a figure of a bat-like silhouette standing out of a background not only grounds, but *constrains* that in the RF of that experience one only sees a bat flying in front of a background. Wittgenstein (1980) stressed a similar point as regards ambiguous pictures: in the famous duck-rabbit picture one can see either a duck (in one visual organization of its vehicle) or a rabbit (in another visual organization of that vehicle), but nothing more; not a rhino, for instance. With pareidolias, the situation is the same: seeing in the Martian pareidolia a face and not, say, a cat, is constrained by seeing in its vehicle a face-like silhouette.

Now, the most suitable way of capturing how the above sort of constraint works in the case of a seeing-in experience is to start from a suggestion from Wollheim that Wollheim himself unfortunately did not articulate; namely, his already recalled saying (1987) that the two folds of a seeing-in experience are inseparable. For such an inseparability, or better interpenetration, can be accounted for at the level of the *contents* of such folds. The figurative, admittedly *conceptual*, content that is visually grasped in the RF of such an experience, given substantive cognitive penetration, is constrained by the *non-conceptual* content that is visually grasped in the CF of that experience.

Let me explain this point by reverting to the case of 'aspect dawning' pictures; namely, the case in which at a certain moment a subject 'lights up' in the picture's vehicle. This 'lighting up' is definitely constrained in the following sense. Only when one sees the vehicle as enriched by certain *grouping properties* – the properties for a certain array of elements to be arranged in a certain direction along a certain dimension, in what then becomes the CF of a seeing-in perception having a non-conceptual content – involving a certain silhouette in a certain context –, one also sees a subject in it, in what then becomes the RF of that perception having a conceptual content – involving that there is a *F* in a certain scene. For example, only when one groups certain black and white spots of the vehicle by means of certain subjective contours that enable one to see the vehicle as containing *some horsish silhouettes* standing in front of a certain background, in that vehicle so enriched one can see *a group of horses* (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. (by courtesy of Paola Tosti)

In (2005), Lopes has criticized the idea that 'aspect dawning' pictures are affected by a proper seeing-in experience. Indeed according to him, the experience of such a picture only exhibits *pseudo-twofoldness*. For according to him, the pseudo design-seeing component of the alleged CF of that

experience, the one that allegedly grasps the design properties of the vehicle, i.e., the properties that should be responsible for what one sees in the vehicle, is not independent of what one allegedly sees in the picture, hence of the alleged RF itself of that experience.

Yet for me that this criticism is not correct. As regards ‘aspect-dawning’ pictures, first, the CF of their seeing-in experience is at most *weakly* cognitively penetrated (MacPherson 2012). For the relevant concepts – in my example, the concept *horse* – are only responsible for the change in phenomenal character of the perception of the vehicle from time t , when one sees no picture, to time t' , when that perception becomes the CF of the seeing-in perceptual experience by means of which one sees a picture. Yet such concepts do not determine the CF’s content, which remains non-conceptual. Second, that CF undergoes *cognitive penetration lite* (MacPherson 2012). For such a conceptual influence is only *contingent*: other tokens of the same CF may be not penetrated, not even weakly. As in the following case of the double cross (Fig. 11), in which seeing a certain 3D grouping of the vehicle’s black-and-white triangles rather than another one may take place without any conceptual triggering, as Wittgenstein (1980: I§970) originally stressed.



Fig. 11. (personal drawing)

So, even as regards ‘aspect-dawning’ pictures, the design-seeing component of the CF of their seeing-in experience is independent of what one sees in the picture, hence of the RF of that experience. In any case, my point on constraint is independent of ‘aspect dawning’ pictures, which for me simply show vividly how the content of the RF of a seeing-in experience is constrained by the content of the CF of that experience. In this respect, let’s start from pareidolias again. In the RF of a seeing-in experience, one can see a human face in a Martian rock (Fig. 3) only by virtue of the fact that, in that experience’s CF, one organizes facially the relevant elements of the rock.⁹ Second, let’s move to a proper picture that is similar to a pareidolia but for the fact that it is a pictorial representation of something. In the RF of a seeing-in experience, one can see a human being in the aforementioned stick figure of the former US President Donald Trump (Fig. 7), only by virtue of the fact that, in that experience’s CF, one organizes humanly the colors and shapes that the vehicle of such a figure instantiates.

Once this is the case with stick figures, the point can be generalized to any picture whatsoever. For example, as for the Rosselli’s painting (Fig. 6), in the RF of the seeing-in experience of it one could not see a convict holding a wooden cross in his hands if one had not already arranged suitably, in that experience’s CF, the colors and shapes of the patches that are painted in its vehicle.

Conclusions

In this paper, firstly, I have defended a marriagist approach stemming from Wollheim, according to which what one sees in a picture not merely matches, but properly coincides with what that

picture presents. My argument ultimately relies on the independently proved idea that the second fold of a seeing-in experience, the recognitional fold, is substantively cognitively penetrated, as Wollheim originally maintained. Secondly, I have claimed that a seeing-in experience so conceived can remain genuinely perceptual, although in the *sui generis* form of a twofold experience as Wollheim wished, only if one can explain how the conceptual content of its RF is keyed in a suitably non-conceptual content of its CF.

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Notes

- ¹ Indeed, Wollheim ascribes the non-ordinary elements mobilized by those paintings not to their figurative content, fixed by what he there labels the *Representational How*, which “corresponds to a property of the what of representation” (2003b:143), but to what he there labels the *Presentation How*, which he qualifies as follows: “It may reflect a range of things from the expressive vision of the artist, through the artistic pressures of the day, to the artist’s technical limitations.” (*ivi*).
- ² I choose to focus on the Wollheim cases, since for me they paradigmatically exemplify the situation at issue. Granted, they are not the only cases. As Hopkins (1998:124–8) remarks, cases of pictorial indeterminacy stress the same point. According to him, for marriagists the figurative content of certain pictures is as indeterminate as what one sees in them, while for separatists is the other way around. Yet I am not sure that for marriagists such cases must be interpreted as Hopkins claims. One may rather claim that for marriagists the figurative content of such pictures is just as *determinate* as what one sees in them. See what I will say concerning the following figures 4, 6, and perhaps even 7.
- ³ This completion is *amodal*, since no sense modality is involved in it.
- ⁴ For the purposes of this paper, I want to remain neutral as regards whether in that perceptual commitment one really *sees* (presented) absences, or one should conceive that commitment differently. For a positive answer to this question, see Farennikova (2013,2019).
- ⁵ Hopkins (1998:122,128) takes inexplicit non-commitment as a form of content indeterminacy, for him affecting only what the picture presents. This commitment differs from *explicit* non-commitment, which regards cases of (presented) occlusions. Consider Fig.5 again. In seeing it, one is explicitly not committed on whether there is, say, a (presented) mole on the (presented) left-hand shoulder. For the (presented) dress (presentedly) occludes that (presented) shoulder.
- ⁶ But if there were two pictures indistinguishable in the CFs of their seeing-in experiences that present the very same greyish scene, yet such that the first picture is physically black-and-white while the second picture is physically in color, would such pictures be different in the RFs of such experiences – in the RF of the first experience one would see black-and-white individuals, while in that of the second experience one would see individuals of no particular color – as for Hopkins marriagists are implausibly forced to hold (1998:125)? No. For the background knowledge regarding those pictures and concerning that scene would remain the same. Granted, such pictures may differ in the properties ascribed to what they *depict* – a non-colored vs. a greyish colored *Sujet* – as in Hopkins’ example, which mobilizes photos. But as we have seen before, *depictive*

content is out of our present concern, which instead regards whether what we see in a picture coincides with its *figurative* content. The story would be different if one assumed that such pictures present different situations for which a different background knowledge holds (say, a situation knowingly concerning ordinarily colored individuals and one in which individuals are knowingly greyish).

- ⁷ Condition i) is remindful of Pylyshyn's thesis "[i]f a system is cognitively penetrable then the function it computes is sensitive, in a semantically coherent way, to the organism's goals and beliefs, that is, it can be altered in a way that bears some logical relation to what the person knows." (Pylyshyn 1999:343).
- ⁸ Notoriously, Wollheim had been tempted to answer this problem affirmatively. For in one of his last papers he distinguishes between two forms of 'seen-in' contents of a picture. The former, which he calls figurative content, provides the paradigmatic 'seen-in' item of a painting, what is grasped, as he says, through a 'non-abstract' concept: "table, map, window, woman". The latter, which he calls representational content, provides a nonparadigmatic 'seen-in' item of a painting, something that is not grasped through such a concept. For Wollheim, abstract paintings have only representational content, while figurative paintings have both (2001:131). For other arguments in favor of the thesis that seeing-in is substantively cognitively penetrated, cf. Voltolini (2015,2020b).
- ⁹ The fact that seeing-in experiences also occur with pareidolias shows that the CF's content is entirely non-conceptual. For in the case of pareidolias, one does not have to suppose that one is facing a *picture*, which would force the CF to have an at least partially conceptual content.

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The Images of the “Monster” Tradition, Symbolism and Representations

KARIM SIMPORE

Many authors throughout centuries have tried to interpret the essence of the monster by exploring and exposing the mysteries related to the physical, spiritual, and philosophical dimensions of monstrosity. Iris Idelson-Shein contends that the originality of the concept of the monster finds its etymological roots in classical Latin. As Idelson-Shein reveals, “The very word Monster is derived from the Latin *monstrare*, meaning to demonstrate, to warn, or to reveal” (37). From this prospective, in an article entitled “Throne Visions and Monsters: The Encounter between Danielic and Enochic Traditions,” Helge Kvanvig contests standard interpretations of the monster by many scholars. As Kvanvig explains:

In *Roots of Apocalyptic* I argued for another possibility, interpreting the imagery of the monsters as a Babylonian demonic imagery. I found the list of fifteen demons in *The Assyrian Vision of the Nether World* as especially significant, because it contained many of the features represented in Dan 7 in its vivid description of the monsters.^{aa} (260)

In the same vein, Joseph T. Lienhard studies the controversial works of Origen Adamantius who was one of the pioneers of Christian theology. He points out “Opposition to Origen had been growing for centuries. Shortly before Constantinople II, the Emperor Justinian issued an edict against Origen’s person and doctrines, in the form of a conciliar decree” (52). However, Guy Williams and other scholars highlight the evident textual ambivalence in Origen’s contentious works regarding his definition of a demon. In this regard, Williams avers, “it is unclear as to whether Origen considers the beasts to be a purely demonic symbol or whether he considers physical beasts, with which Paul fought, to be instruments of the devil. The latter interpretation should probably be favored, since it fits better with the first quotation, but we cannot be certain” (55). When analyzing the Bible, the reader is struck by the richness and splendor of these sacred texts from a historical, spiritual, and mythical perspective. Biblical authors depict various beasts that often have conflicting identities. Indeed, Judeo-Christian holy scriptures are replete with descriptions, commentaries, and prophecies that are inextricably linked to a frightening world. For instance, in the Book of Revelation, the author asserts:

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: And she is being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered. And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born (12:1-4).

Noting that much has been written about this nuanced subject, Anne E. Gardner posits: “A debate exists as to the identity of the beast with the majority of critical scholars asserting that it represents Media while a minority, of a conservative bent, posit that it stands for both Media and Persia” (223). In the same vein, Scott B. Noegel theorizes on the physical form that these demons assume: “Thus, some texts understand the creature as possessing multiple heads, others see it as having one. Sometimes it also is equated with a lion or a sea monster with lionlike features”. (241)

The biblical passage cited above helps us to evaluate the complex identity relationship between cosmic forces and humanity. In this passage, the fusion of the human—represented by the woman—and cosmic realm is quite remarkable. Details are scant regarding this woman endowed with super-human powers who clothes herself with the sun and stands on top of the moon wearing a crown of twelve stars. Regardless, it is evident that this enigmatic woman possesses a power that grants her the status of a goddess. Highlighting this divine specificity of the woman, Iris Idelson-Shein explains that this image of a woman symbolizes a force that if not mastered might turn into a monster. As Idelson-Shein notes: "That female power is represented as a horrendous, murderous deformity, a transgression of nature [...]. Her freedom will be a condition of personal privilege that deprives those on which she exercises it" (54).

Nonetheless, in spite of this seemingly supernatural strength, she remains vulnerable. According to the biblical narrative, a monstrous dragon with seven heads and ten horns sprang up from out of nowhere hurling a third of the stars down upon the earth. Going from bad to worse, this monster is ready to devour the child to whom the woman was about to give birth. This spectacle reflects a Manichean vision of chaos underpinned by a perpetual war between good and evil. In an effort to understand this dichotomy between good and evil more fully, Scott J. Jones underscores that our universe is so chaotic that it is inhabited by beasts, monsters and humans who are all creatures of God (856).

Echoing Jones's analysis, Michael V. Fox highlights contemporary perceptions concerning the notion of the monster and beast in the larger context of the concept of cosmic chaos: "In an effort to bring to the fore the chaos and danger thought to inhere in God's description of the cosmos, contemporary commentators have dramatized the evil of Behemoth and Leviathan. The beasts are described as 'horridly terrifying creatures' and 'uncontrollable, except to a limited degree by God'" (9). As the Bible states, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:1-3). In the same cosmogonic context, Joseph T. Lienhard analyzes the scope and the symbolic value of the "Word" which represents the origin of all the creatures that inhabit the cosmos:

The anathemas dealt mostly with cosmological and eschatological speculation: the preexistence of souls, including Christ's; that the Word of God became a cherub for cherubim and a seraph for seraphim; that the resurrection body will be spherical (an accusation that refused to die); that celestial bodies have rational souls. (52)

Guy Williams claims that as far as the status of the beast in this cosmic dynamic of creation is concerned, it stands out from the dominion of the myth that embodies the existential realm: "In addition to these general patterns of folklore, certain beasts were elevated to a particular mythical status. Behemoth is a case in point" (46). Hence, modern theorists tend to establish causal links between the catastrophic circumstances that plague humans and their relationship to malevolent forces symbolized by creatures like Behemoth or Leviathan. Punishment is thus accepted and validated as the result of unnatural relations between man and evil in the form of a monster or the devil, which is often represented by a snake. As the author of the Book of *Genesis* reveals:

And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:
For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons (3:4-6).

As many critics note regarding the representation of the devil as a snake, we witness the multiplication of various incarnations of the devil through beasts or monsters such as the lion, dragon, and leopard. Moreover, the singularity of Scott B. Noegel's point is noteworthy, given that he distances

himself from the positions taken by most of the critics in the field. Specifically, Noegel maintains, “The devil is none other than Leviathan, whom Rev 12:9, 20:2 recognizes as Satan. In Western Christian-ity, beginning already in the 3rd century CE, one finds paintings, sarcophogai, and other funerary art that link Jonah to Leviathan by depicting the ‘fish’ as a fantastic sea monster with large sharp teeth, tall ears, mammalian forearms, and a long serpentine tail” (221).

However, we can also find animals that have conflicting representations. For example, it is noteworthy in the following passages from the Bible that the lion has several representations that may appear to be incompatible to some readers:

“Behold, the people shall rise up as a great lion, and lift up himself as a young lion: he shall not lie down until he eat of the prey, and drink the blood of the slain (Number 23:24); “And of Gad he said, Blessed be he that enlargeth Gad: he dwelleth as a lion, and teareth the arm with the crown of the head. (Deuteronomy 33:20); “And of Dan he said, Dan is a lion’s whelp: he shall leap from Bashan. (Deuteronomy 33:22); “And David said unto Saul, Thy servant kept his father’s sheep, and there came a lion, and a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock: (1Samuel 17: 34). These biblical passages underscore the importance of the diversity of the representations of the beast illustrated here by the lion. This diversity represents an opportunity to consider the Judaic dogmas related to the evolution of beliefs concerning the concept of the beast. Demonstrating that we find ourselves in the midst of a supernatural universe, Guy Williams asserts: “From earliest times in Judaism, wild animals tended to be conflated with supernatural beasts and evil spirits. Anything that lived outside the bounds of civilized life, in wild and deserted places, tended to be viewed as unfamiliar, uncanny, and dangerous” (46). This fundamental assertion goes beyond the representations of the beast.

Indeed, as David I. Shyovitz argues, these dogmatic representations reveal a belief system specific to a culture rather than a quest for spirituality: “In this view, monsters are ‘specular objects’—the monstrous creatures that surface in particular historical contexts serve as lenses that reveal the key beliefs, values, and anxieties of the cultures in which they were generated” (522). As Steven J. Friesen points out, these monsters live in places as varied as they are multiform. While some reside in oceans, like Leviathan, some like Behemoth are more present in the desert: “In this section we learn that the two primordial monsters were separated at creation. Leviathan dwells in the abyss of the ocean at the sources of the deep, while Behemoth dwells in a mythic desert east of Eden” (Friesen 304).

Friesen’s point of view is supported by passages from Daniel and Revelation. As the author of the Book of Daniel recounts: “In my visions of the night I, Daniel, was gazing intently and I saw a great sea churned up by the four winds of heaven, and four huge beasts coming up out of the sea” (Daniel 7:2). Irena Doroto Backus presents the historical and geographical context in which the Book of Daniel was written. Backus explains, “The book of Daniel probably written during the period of Antiochus Epiphanes (175–163 BCE) to comfort the Jews in their distress and to assure them of approaching divine intervention, marks the beginnings of apocalyptic literature” (Backus 59). The case in point here is the focus on the struggles of the Jewish people. Enlightening the reader on the discourse of the beast viewed through a Christian lens, Backus emphasizes, “Scholars have paid particular attention to the place of anti-Jewish polemic in medieval discourses of monstrosity, noting that Christian think-ers’ ideas about and depictions of Jews and monsters were oftentimes mutu-ally reinforcing” (522). Arguing along similar lines, Joseph T. Lienhard recalls the foundational roots of the Christian faith that marked the life of Origen, a foundation that allowed him to adopt an atypical lifestyle: “In his late teens or early twenties, however, Origen undertook a rigorous ascetical life: fasting, going barefoot, sleeping on a simple mat. He also served the church of Alexandria as a catechist” (52).

Despite his early devotion to the Christian faith, Lienhard illustrates that Origen will be portrayed as a heretic and subsequently treated as an enemy of the church. As Lienhard explains, “In its eleventh canon, the Second Council of Constantinople (553) anathematized Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, Apollinaris, Nestorius, and Origen, along with their impious writings” (52). In this instance, Helge S. Kvanvig’s comments allow us to understand that Daniel’s choice was not made by chance. His decision resulted from a special meeting between Daniel and the Giants. As Kvanvig asserts, “The

contact between Daniel and Giants is so close that it seems to indicate dependence as well. The most convincing argument for this is the identical words in the same order” (255). Conversely, Pieter GR De Villiers is not concerned about the historical spaces in which these monsters evolve. De Villiers is interested in the actions and characteristics of these monsters. Ultimately drawing the conclusion that these monsters are interchangeable representing the same evil spirit (i.e. the devil that manifests itself in several forms), he maintains: “When it comes to the portrayal of evil in Revelation, it tends to focus more on the two beasts and Babylon, thereby neglecting the character and actions of the dragon, which is ultimately the ‘prime evil’ and protagonist of evil in the book” (De Villiers 58). David I. Shyovitz answers his critics by illustrating the multiples stages of the beast’s perpetual transformation: “Medieval biblical exegetes followed the lead of their forebears, and also took pains to explain away biblical passages which describe apparent metamorphoses” (525). Proposing a similar interpretation, Guy Williams sheds light on the accounts of Apostle Paul who also dealt with demons considered to be beasts: “Cor 15:31 So, in the following, it will be argued that Paul viewed the confrontations and physical threats that he experienced in Ephesus as instigated by the evil spirits, or ‘beasts’ at work in the demon-possessed, sorcerers, and idolaters of the city” (45). According to Graydon F. Snyder, this perspective could find its source in the behavior of the first Christians. In the face of danger and vulnerability, they transcended the visible and perceptible nature of the monster itself. As Snyder argues: “When people face an unknown threat, they often see things not otherwise visible” (7). In the same vein, Greg Goswell, a renowned expert on the Book of Daniel, illustrates in an article entitled “The Visions of Daniel and Their Historical Specificity” that the representation of the kingdoms found in the second chapter of Daniel is of the utmost importance. As Goswell avers, “In the prayer of Daniel, in which he praises God for his revelation of the content (and interpretation) of the king’s dream” (Dan 2:20–23), the description of God as he who ‘removes kings and sets up kings’ (2:21) is particularly significant” (130). Concluding that this distinction or dichotomy between the different actors and agents who populate the cosmos is simply reductive, Scott C. Jones indicates that in God’s perception, “Contrary to Job’s imaginings, Yahweh’s world is one in which the wild and the monstrous are central, and they are the objects of God’s provision” (855). To comprehend Jones’s position more fully, it is essential to reflect upon this passage from the book of *Psalms*:

Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD from the heavens, praise him in the heights above.
 Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his heavenly hosts.
 Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars.
 Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies.
 Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded, and they were created.
 He set them in place for ever and ever; he gave a decree that will never pass away.
 Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,
 lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding,
 your mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars,
 wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds,
 kings of the earth and all nations, you princes, and all rulers on earth,
 young men and maidens, old men, and children.
 Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.
 He has raised up for his people a horn, [2] the praise of all his saints, of Israel, the people close to his heart.
 Praise the Lord. (148: 4–14)

In the words of John B. Geyer, we see an effort to examine and interpret the paradoxes implicated in cosmic forces: “In the so-called Zion Theology when Yahweh is recognized as king, he establishes the earth firmly so that it cannot be moved (Ps. xciii 1). But in the time of chaos the world trembles and shakes (Isa. xiii 13) which is the case also in Ps. lx 4” (John 50). These passages demonstrate that the Lord’s fingerprints are inscribed upon all living beings and visible throughout the entire cosmos. In Genesis 1, we learn that sea monsters were created long before humans. Therefore, monsters and

humans derive their existence from the same creator. The physical description of these monsters recounted by John is so terrifying to the point that it seems like a horror movie:

The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was filled with wonder and followed the beast (*Revelation* 13:1).

Williams in the effort to decipher this revelation has to disconnect the natural and the supernatural aspects of the beast: "The more general blurring of boundaries between the natural and supernatural 'beast' also continued to develop in apocalyptic traditions" (47). In this chaotic world, John seems to witness a strange manifestation: a monster comes out of the sea with ten horns upon which blasphemous names are stamped. This monster possesses representative elements of the leopard, the bear, and the lion. A monster standing by the sea known as a dragon accompanies this hybrid beast. Shedding more light on the representation of these horns, the author of the Book of *Daniel* writes:

The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. He will speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws. The holy people will be delivered into his hands for a time, times and half a time (*Daniel* 7:24).

William's point of view on the separation of both characteristics explained above is in line with the commentary of David I. Shyovitz who observes a change in Nebuchadnezzar who used to enjoy certain privileges due to his rank of king before being chased into a bush and starting to eat like an animal. As Shyovitz highlights: "For instance, in his commentary to *Daniel* 4:30, an obscure verse that describes how Nebuchadnezzar was 'driven away from his people, and ate grass like cattle,' the twelfth-century biblical exegete" (525). What is striking here is that despite scary and repulsive characters, the Bible can use narratives constructed upon monstrous paradigms to explain or predict future events. As the Book of *Daniel* explains, these monstrous horns represent kings or those with a great deal of power who will oppress the saints for 'a time, times and half a time.' Later in *Revelation* 20, we discover that this dragon will be chained down and thrown into the abyss. Attempting to interpret the future of the beast that has yet to transpire, Greg Goswell theorizes, "The other exegetical possibility is that the reader is meant to understand that the image is demolished from bottom to top, for the stone strikes the image at its weakest point, the feet of iron mixed with clay that forms its base" (Goswell 131). In the context of the last days of these kings, Irena Backus further elucidates, "The first beast thus represents the kingdoms of Assyria and Babylon. He is given a human heart and placed on his feet because of his knowledge of God. The second beast, the bear, is the kingdom of Medes and Persians which destroyed the Assyrian kingdom" (Backus 62). However, as Williams notes, the Jewish tradition of associating the devil with wild animals, especially as a physical persecutor, was also preserved in apocalyptic literature. Early Christianity adopted a large amount of this Jewish 'beast' imagery, with particularly prominent examples being the abusive, eschatological monsters of *Revelation* and the 'roaring lion' (the devil), who causes persecution in *Pet.* 5:8-9. (49).

The sea seems to be almost omnipresent in these depictions of the universe as monstrous. However, Graydon F. Snyder identifies a sort of spatial displacement in the present age. The monster no longer appears to be satisfied with haunting the sea, it has now conquered the totality of space. As Snyder notes, "We do not see many Sea Monsters, but now the unknown is out there in space, not down under the water. So we see aliens, some which take on the form of monsters more terrifying than anything sighted by Perseus or Hercules" (7). Adopting the same perspective as Snyder, we could argue that *Daniel* also painted an image of the monster throughout space. In the Book of *Daniel*, the author reveals, "I saw another, a beast like a leopard with four birds wings on its back, this

creature had four heads and it was invested with sovereign power. Next my visions of the night I saw a fourth beast, dreadful and grisly, exceedingly strong, with great iron teeth and bronze claws" (*Daniel* 7:6). This idea of monsters invading almost the entire space seems to be shared as well by Scott C. Jones who finds that these monsters are contesting the commonly accepted limits of reality that deserve to be reconsidered. As Jones contends, "But in my view, they challenge the very norms of monstrosity itself. So, rather than being demonic creatures that are 'cosmological accidents' or 'evil which escapes the command of gods and humans, these monsters and their glorious bod-ies are central to the created order'" (Jones 861). Indeed, Leviathan, which is the predominant monster par excellence in biblical writings, seems to be found in many books of the Bible.

Similar to Jones who tries to explain the ambivalence of creation and the back and forth between humans and monsters, Scott B. Noegel sends the reader back to cosmogony origins of the monster when God created the Leviathan on the fifth day: "According to the midrash, this was a special creature, made by God on the fifth day of creation, and differed from Leviathan, with which Jonah conversed. Le-viathan, the king of the sea, was another of God's creatures, intended for his play (*Psalms* 104:26) and ultimately for feasting upon by the righteous in the messianic world to come according to this Jewish concept" (238). However, Williams warns us that this tendency to associate monsters with beasts could find its origins in Jewish customs. As Williams argues, "The Jewish tradition of associating the devil with wild animals, especially as a physical persecutor, was also preserved in apocalyptic literature. Early Christianity adopted a large amount of this Jewish 'beast' imagery, with particularly prominent examples being the abusive, eschatological monsters of Revelation and the 'roaring lion' (the devil), who causes persecution in *Pet.* 5:8-9" (49). We find it in *Psalms*, *Isaiah*, *Job*, and *Revelation*. The Leviathan sometimes manifests itself as a snake or a dragon with several heads. In this regard, Michael V. Fox concludes, "the biblical authors pictured Leviathan in various ways" (12). In various passages of the Bible, the snake is represented differently. In *Genesis*, the devil takes the form of a serpent to deceive Eve and to coerce her into consuming the fruit of the forbidden tree. Consequently, Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden, and they begin to wander endlessly because of this seductive snake. On the other hand, Moses's snake, the one created when the prophet throws his staff on the ground, is totally different from the serpent in the Garden of Eden. This snake, which is sometimes a staff, is used to perform divine miracles. For instance, in *Exodus* 7, Moses challenges Pharaoh's magicians that will be swallowed by the prophet's serpent. This striking image of Moses' staff, which is transformed into a snake according to *Exodus*, should be understood in the context of Lee M. Jefferson's research: "In third and fourth-century catacomb images of Christ raising Lazarus, the staff appears in a majority of the scenes" (227).

This rod is also present in the book of *Numbers* (21: 9) where we are told that Moses made a bronze snake and placed it on a pole. Whomever this snake bit would be healed by gazing upon this serpent of brass. Here, the combination of the two characteristics of the snake— a beast endowed with a mortal, venomous power and the figurative snake with healing powers made by Moses—is evident. Scott B. Noegel's analysis of Jonah and the giant fish allows us to draw parallels with Moses' bronze serpent. In general, fish are meant to be caught and consumed by man. However, the fish seems to be the predator and the man the prey in this situation, although the beast did not digest him. Through this experience, Jonah discovers a divine wisdom that enables him to preach to the people of Ninevah as he was instructed to do before he ran away: "In exchange, the fish shows Jonah the mysteries of the great deep through his eyes, which serve as illuminated windows" (220–221).

Steven J. Friesen tries to explain how a single beast can have so many representations. In traditional Israeli society, several names could be given to the same monster. In the Book of Revelation, there are attributes that personify the monster rendering it physically tangible. We discover that in the end the dragon will be caught and chained up for one thousand years before being unleashed during the last judgment. Arie C. Leder proposes a new interpretation of this extraordinary piece of wood from a different angle:

Several aspects of the meaning of “staff” are illustrated by four divine figures painted in the tomb of Seti I. Each holds a staff and is accompanied by an inscription. In ascending order, the first figure holding a tree of life is called the lord of the creative word; the second, a royal figure, holds a shepherd’s staff; the third figure carries the was staff emblematic of life and health; and the fourth holds a simple staff (97–98).

In the Book of Jonah, the author recounts the story of Jonah fleeing God’s presence. He found himself in a boat and was thrown into the water for three days in the belly of a monster fish who ends up vomiting him. Jonah’s stay in the monster’s belly for three days could be interpreted as an allegory of the duration of Jesus’ death that was resurrected on the third day. The monster is nearly always present from *Genesis* to *Revelation*. Jonah could be a representation of Jesus because he was on a divine mission to convert the people of Nineveh. The fish monster obviously represents the crucifixion, the death, the darkness, and the hell that engulfed Jonah for three days. This image is reminiscent of the efforts of many theologians who are trying to figure out where Jesus was between the time of the crucifixion and the time of the resurrection. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, it is clearly stated. Therefore, it says: “When he ascended on high, he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above” (*Ephesians* 4: 8–10)). What are the lower regions of the earth to which the author refers? Nobody knows. However, some scholars believe that he also liberated captives and gave them gifts. Although the image of death associated with the monster is somewhat frightening, we also know that a victory is won, salvation is proclaimed, and captives are delivered through this monster of death. After being spewed out by the monster fish, Jonah accomplished his mission of deliverance and salvation in Nineveh. In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians we read: “Death, where is your sting? Hell, where is your victory? Here, the scarecrow, the fear of the monster that brings death falls to shreds. The monster is no longer victorious. His power is broken.

The presence of the dragon in the scriptures does not just lie at the intersection between the past and present, but it also unveils future events depicted in Revelation and Ezekiel. In Isaiah, the author declares: “The staff that struck you, Philistines, was broken, but do not rejoice at it. Indeed, a viper will come out of the dead snake, and the viper will give birth to a flying dragon” (*Isaiah* 14:29). From a metaphorical and spiritual standpoint, this verse is rather enigmatic. First, on a metaphorical level, the stick represents all the adversities, attacks, and humiliations endured by the Jews during the decline of Israel under the reign of King Hezekiah and the Assyrian expansion. This passage could also refer to the four hundred years of suffering experienced by the Israelites in Egypt. Forced to make bricks for the construction of Pharaoh’s palaces, the people of Israel were subjected to slavery.

The prodigy child Moses, raised with privileges and honors, puts an end to the suffering of the Jews by leading the exodus to the Promised Land. This ends with the mystery of life and death—represented by the viper and the dragon, one being paradoxically the culmination of the other. However, it also undermines our Cartesian, dichotomous paradigms of existence. While seemingly fragile, ‘Life enshrined in death’ is wrapped in indestructible layers. Life that seems to be regulated by cosmic forces themselves escapes the control of the matter that encapsulates it. This is why Scott B. Noegel asserts that: “The antiquity of Leviathan and its cosmic meaning is well-known” (242) in the sense that very old texts reveal abundantly consistent interpretations of this identity of the beast, Leviathan. This interactive force transcends time, space, the senses, life, extinction, the real and the unreal. As the author of the Book of Revelation explains: “A great sign appears in the sky: it is a woman. The sun envelops it like a garment; the moon is under its feet. On her head, she wears a crown of twelve stars. She will soon give birth to a child, and the suffering of childbirth makes her scream” (*Revelation* 12: 1–2). The woman in question in this passage is impersonal, elusive, intangible, yet sensitive and emotional. Later in the same passage, this sign initially originating from a woman has become a great, mighty dragon that picks up the stars from the sky and hurls them down to the earth (*Revelation* 12: 3–4). This revelation helps us to understand Iris Idelson-Shein’s analysis who refers to disruptive clichés surrounding the definition of the monster in both ancient and

modern thought paradigms: “Thus, from ancient medicine to contemporary horror films, monstrosity has widely been assigned to the vagina, the womb, or the menstrual charge, which is often thought of as contagiously impure and to which the ability to produce monsters has also been ascribed in both Jewish and Christian lore” (38).

In his intertextual analysis of the relationship between the monsters in *Exodus* and ancient beasts, Arie C. Leder summarizes the fundamental differences between Moses and Pharaoh as follows:

Although the annual flooding of the Nile was understood as beneficial, Egypt was familiar with the threat of chaos. There, writes Keel, ‘the eve-ning darkness is above all the domain of the monstrous serpent Apophis (who)... is the embodiment of the dark sea, the evening clouds, and the morning haze—in a word, those forces which can endanger the sun at its setting in the evening and on its rising in the morning.’” (99).

In some biblical verses, there are other manifestations of the beast that open up into apocalyptic dimensions marking the end of the world. As the author of Revelation reveals:

And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies gathered to make war on him who sat on the horse and his army. And the beast was taken, and with it the false prophet, who had done before him the wonders by which he deceived those who had taken the mark of the beast and worshipped his image. Both were thrown alive into the lake, burning with fire and brimstone (19: 19–20).

It is important to note the ambiguity that emerges from the association of the beast, the kings of the earth, and the false prophet. The beast here being impersonal can only be the incarnation of the evil that manifests itself through an identity, economic, social, intellectual and ecological crisis. It is in this chaotic environment of disordered values and loss of familiar landmarks that the false prophet will emerge, who appears in an insidious way, considering himself to be the only one capable of proposing solutions to crisis. This is one of the reasons why the Bible views this false prophet as the great seducer who will eventually impose his mark on all the inhabitants of the earth. Emphasizing the tactics of the beast to seduce the world in his article “The Nature of the Beast, James Shoopman affirms:”The beast goes on to seduce the world with its powers and persecutes the church. Despite fundamentalists’ insistence that they interpret the Bible literally, I have never heard anyone suggest that this means Godzilla, or something like her, arises out of the sea, either in the past or the future” (67–68). As the story is told in the Bible, no one will be able to buy and sell without this mark. This mark etched in numbers symbolizes the system in which all sectors of modern life operate. These numbers govern our life today. Our bankcards, electronic files, health records, travel documents, forms of personal identification and so on are archived, managed, and transferred by intelligent entities that go beyond our understanding. No one can assert today with certainty the amount of information collected related to his accounts without his knowledge. Are we all already carrying the number of the beast? It is impossible to be certain, but it is nonetheless true that no one is spared from the indelible imprint of the beast that has penetrated the heart of our holistic system. From the cradle to the grave, numbers saturate us. We do not know how deep we are submerged in this abyssal all-digital world. Yet, we have been warned about the rise of the beast that will subjugate us through the mark of numbers, thereby destroying the world. Some famous people have sounded the alarm. Elon Musk is one of them who is worried about the acceleration and expansion of Artificial Intelligence (AI). He endeavors to pull us out of our comfort zone and to force us to think about the consequences related to the full potential of this giant beast called high technology. 2,700 years ago a prophet opened the veil giving us a glimpse of the events that will occur in conjunction with the awakening of the beast: “Sentence of the beasts of the South: Through a land of distress and anguish, where do the lioness and the lion come from, The viper and the flying dragon, They carry on their donkeys their riches, And on the hump of camels their treasures, To a people that will not be useful to them” (Isaiah 30: 6). The work of Kirsten Nielsen provides a more comprehensive prospective about the creatures found in the book of Ezekiel that enriches our understanding of these beasts. As Nielsen theorizes:

Lions, oxen and eagles transcend our human grasp. The lion, the most dangerous of all beasts of prey, is a serious threat to animals and humans alike. The ox is the strongest of all the creatures that humans can tame, while the eagle is the biggest bird of prey and can move through the air at great speed (104).

It is easy to see that Nielsen tries to show the ferocity of these animals, which is inextricably linked to their physical presence. Offering a similar interpretation, David I. Shyovitz affirms, “For classical and medieval authors, monstrous creatures were meaningful by definition—in St. Augustine’s influential formulation, the very term ‘monsters’ (*monstra*) ‘come[s] from the [verb] *monstrare*, ‘show,’ because they show [demonstrent] something by a sign” (521).

In the book of *Isaiah*, the prophet laments:

Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth!
 For the Lord has spoken:
 I reared children and brought them up,
 but they have rebelled against me.
 The ox knows its master,
 the donkey its owner’s manger,
 [...]
 Woe to the sinful nation,
 a people whose guilt is great,
 a brood of evildoers,
 children given to corruption!
 They have forsaken the Lord;
 They have spurned the Holy One of Israel
 And turned their backs on him.
 Why should you be beaten anymore?
 Why do you persist in rebellion?
 Your whole head is injured,
 Your whole heart afflicted.
 From the sole of your foot to the top of your head
 There is no soundness—
 Only wounds and welts
 And open sores,
 Not cleansed or bandaged
 Or soothed with olive oil (1: 1–6).

There is no need to indicate that the world has never been epitomized by such deep anxiety. All we must do is turn on the TV, surf on our smartphone, or listen to the radio to see the visible manifestation of this distress that is continuously reported to us by the news around the world. According to Revelation, the fury of the beast has descended upon mankind: “And all the inhabitants of the earth will worship him, those whose name was not written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain” (Revelation 13: 8). As the author of Revelation indicates, “When they will have finished their testimony, the beast rising from the abyss will make war on them, defeat them, and kill them” (11: 7). According to the biblical, apocalyptic narrative, another divine force will try to persuade man not to venerate the beast to spare him from the deadly consequences of this adoration. This veneration transcends the spiritual realm, given that it has permeated all facets of human life.

It should be noted the growing interest of scholars who seek to discern the symbolism of the beast. For instance, Guy Williams expresses an interest in Jewish literature intended to instill moral virtues through animals: “A related tendency of ancient Jewish writings was to moralize strongly with wild animals. They could be not simply wild, but wicked. So, we encounter such phrases in the Bible as ‘an evil wild beast’ (Gen. 37:20) or, ‘any evil beast’ (Isa. 35:9) 46.” The images of animals such as snake, lion, bear, dragon are disseminated throughout the Bible in a multiform of monsters that live in the

nature but also can be manifested in the spiritual realm. In the Bible, the books of *Daniel* and *Ezekiel* depict these beasts and monsters in the philosophical standpoint. Their presence reflects the complex world in which the humankind is evolving. It may also indicate the crossing point between mythical forces that we have named spirit, monster, beast, or dragon.

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Soul-blindness, Trauma, Reenactment: A Cavellian Reading of *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*

RAFFAELE ARIANO

Abstract: This article aims to demonstrate how concepts from Stanley Cavell's ethical and epistemological reflections can enhance discussions within trauma and reenactment studies by providing a valuable philosophical framework. A case study is presented through two documentaries by Joshua Oppenheimer, which focus on the Indonesian mass killings of 1955–1966. The article argues that, when considered in relation to film theory issues such as realism, spectatorship, and performance, the unique first-person reenactments in these documentaries can be effectively analyzed using Cavell's Wittgenstein-inspired concepts of aspect-seeing, soul-blindness, and imagination.

Keywords: Stanley Cavell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Joshua Oppenheimer, aspect-seeing, intersubjectivity

Introduction: A History of Violence

Joshua Oppenheimer's two feature films both focus on the legacy of the mass killings that took place in Indonesia in 1965–1966, but from two different perspectives. While *The Look of Silence* (2014) makes Adi, the brother of a victim, the protagonist of the documentary, following his search for truth, meaning, and reconciliation almost fifty years after the events, *The Act of Killing* (2012), in a significant move that will be the focus of the concluding section of this article, stars one of the executioners, a former "gangster" named Anwar Congo.

Thanks to a few essential captions and fragments of information scattered in interviews, the viewer can reconstruct historical events of disturbing proportions. Following the military coup of 1965, a wave of violence and purges – classified as spontaneous by the authorities but actually carried out on behalf of the army and government by a nebula of paramilitary militias and organized criminal groups – erupted across the vast Indonesian archipelago. In just over three months, we learn, about a million people were exterminated. Officially labeled as "communists," the victims actually included not only members and sympathizers of the Indonesian Communist Party but also landless peasants, intellectuals, unionists, and people of Chinese nationality.

It also emerges that at the time the two films were shot, i.e. about fifteen years after the end of the dictatorship, the country was still far from even beginning to come to terms with its own historical memory. A multitude of figures directly or indirectly involved in the massacres are still shown to occupy top positions in the Indonesian power system. School curricula are still silent about the massacres, while indulging, as we learn in a scene set in a school, in a characterization of the "communists" that is hard not to interpret as outright political propaganda, with content in continuity with that of the regime films produced in the years following the massacres and with what, still in the 2000s, the executioners openly claim about their old victims: that they were cruel torturers, conspirators, atheists, that they had the habit of exchanging wives, etc.

Thus, it is easy to understand why the few "neutral" people interviewed in the films, those who were neither victims nor executioners, maintain an ambiguous and suspicious attitude: the perpetrators are indeed still among them, an integral part of their everyday life scenario; and this is also the condition in which relatives and descendants of the victims live.

A Cinematic Method: Documentary and Reenactment

Oppenheimer certainly relies on the referential capabilities of the film medium, on that capacity for mechanical and photographic reproduction of reality that has led critics and theorists to describe cinema as a “dramaturgy of nature” (Bazin 1967, 110), as focused on the medium of “physical reality as such” (Panofsky 1959, 31), as “a succession of automatic world projections” (Cavell 1979a, 72). The director exploits the realistic component of cinema in order to intimate to viewers – to quote Primo Levi’s famous words – “Meditate that this came about,” (Levi 2000, 25) to bear witness to historical events whose appeal might otherwise go unheard. Nonetheless, Oppenheimer’s attitude towards documentary referentiality is never simplistic or linear, and this, not only because the relevant facts happened in a now distant past and are therefore materially *impossible* to film.

Some of Oppenheimer’s precautions can be defined as epistemological. For example, the director does not try to hide the editing through long takes and invisible transitions; he does not feel that the documentary genre forces him to a dialogue grammar different from the classical one based on the succession of shot and reverse shot. Furthermore, he is not physically present in any shot, perhaps because this would have meant arrogating excessive attention for himself; but neither does he try to hide, to foster the illusion of a documentary that is a gaze from nowhere, and therefore does not expunge from the final cut those moments when a character looks off-camera to speak directly to him or the second operator, or those in which the viewer hears the director’s voice intervening in the conversation to ask a question or to reformulate someone’s statement more clearly. Although, in short, Oppenheimer does not ostentatiously declare his presence as a director – Cavell, in two brilliant sections of *The World Viewed*, suggested that the compulsion to self-referentiality and to an assertive film style can be read as a form of self-denunciation by the filmmaker and therefore, paradoxically, as an unwitting tribute to the ideals of honesty, sincerity, and cinematic transparency (Cavell 1979a, 126–46)¹ – he does not try to elide it either, nor does he think it possible to do so.

However, there is a more compelling reason why Oppenheimer cannot base his work on an ideal of complete transparency, a reason that pertains to the specific purposes of his work rather than just to the general characteristics of the film medium or documentary genre. From their introductory captions, *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* show that they do not propose just to represent and witness facts, but rather, so to speak, *to lift a repression*, to bring to consciousness contents that both individuals and the collective discourse had suppressed, thus producing therapeutic effects at a psychological as well as ethical, civil, and political level. For this reason, Oppenheimer resorts to the performative and narrative method of reenactment, which has been the subject of considerable theoretical treatment inside and outside film studies (see especially Donghi 2024, but also Nichols 2008; Agnew, Lamb and Tomann 2020; Bruzzi 2020) and which, in recent decades, particularly in its first-person variety (see Margulies 2019), has been followed by a now sizable group of directors². Focusing around the staging, the dramatized repetition of past events and experiences by those who had lived them in the first place, Oppenheimer’s documentaries aim to be not mirrors of the world, but actions *in* the world and *on* the world, active instruments of meaning construction, ways in which – to freely reference the title of the famous collection of lectures by John Austin – one can “do things with words” (as well as with the body, voice, intention, and everything in human communication that is *performative*).

In both films Oppenheimer structures a hermeneutic circle between performativity and spectatorship that seems to articulate itself in four main steps: 1) the staging by the executioners of past violence and its filmed documentation; 2) the private projection of the footage in front of a restricted audience of people who, as relatives of the victims or as executioners, are directly involved in the events; 3) the documentation of the reaction elicited in the members of this audience, both immediately (through close-ups that capture their facial expressions and body language) and afterwards (the actions they decide to take and the changes in their view of the events); 4) the editing of

all the previous steps within the definitive film, the one addressed to the broader and anonymous audience of people who are not directly involved, i.e., *us*.

Within this basic structure, however, there are two significant asymmetries between the two films. The first is constituted by the degree of elaboration of the staging, of the actual reenactment produced by the executioners during step 1. In *The Look of Silence*, the executioners recount their actions mostly verbally and the performative aspect is limited to physically returning to the crime scenes, as well as their pronounced tendency to mimic, usually in emphatic and detailed ways, the violence committed. In *The Act of Killing*, on the other hand, the executioners, at the director's suggestion, even embark on the project of making a movie about those events, a proper although amateurish feature film with actors, extras, costumes, props, and sets.

The second asymmetry is marked by the protagonists of the second and third steps: while in *The Look of Silence* the viewer to whom the footage with the executioners' statements is shown is the brother of one of the victims, in *The Act of Killing* it is the executioners themselves who view the cinematic reenactment they themselves conceived and performed. Another way to describe this second asymmetry is to state that in *The Look of Silence* the film's protagonist is only the spectator of the reenactment, while in *The Act of Killing* he is both the actor-protagonist and the spectator.

From these two fundamental asymmetries, and particularly from the second, derive the significant differences between the effects produced by the reenactment processes documented in the two films.

Soul-blindness and Otherness: A Philosophical Problem

To fully understand the scope of these differences, however, it is necessary first to bring out what may appear to be the main issue raised by Oppenheimer's cinematic diptych.

At a first level, this issue concerns the psychological and rhetorical automatisms by which the executioners tend to justify their actions: among those interviewed in the two films, there are those who claim to have "merely" followed orders, those who argue that it was necessary to defend "the state," those who protest to not having directly killed any dissident (a justification that, emblematically, is provided both by a humble jailer without glory, who had simply overseen the detention of some victims, and by a prominent military leader who had personally ordered, but not carried out, the killing of tens of thousands of people), and finally those who, having been the material executors, can only resort to the already mentioned propaganda against the "communists". Certain pages from Hannah Arendt's account of the Adolf Eichmann trial come to mind, as well as some of her insights into the intellectual and psychological shallowness, the superficial bad faith that was ingrained in the personality of the persecutor.

However, there is a difference between the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" and the facts told by Oppenheimer that perhaps suggests shifting the focus of our attention. Arendt herself, in her classic, noted that in the context of the Eichmann trial, "if it was of small legal relevance, it was of great political interest to know how long it takes an average person to overcome his innate repugnance toward crime, and what exactly happens to him once he has reached that point" (Arendt 1994, 93). However, this question becomes even more interesting in the case of the Indonesian massacres, given that nothing comparable to the bureaucratic and medical proceduralization that characterized the Nazi extermination of the Jewish people took place. This is not a difference in gravity, obviously, but in modality and therefore in implications: such proceduralization, it could be argued and has been argued, could indeed have aided the self-deception of some, allowing them to hide their individual responsibilities behind the infamous "cog theory" (Arendt 1994, 289). Part of the horror evoked by gas chambers lies in the idea of an industrial organization of massacre, yet it is precisely this industrialization that may have constituted a psychic distancing device for its operators, a facilitation in the process of dehumanizing the victims.

The Indonesian massacres, on the contrary, were carried out with bladed weapons or even bare hands. Without going into the details of the tortures, mutilations, and sadistic methods of execution

extensively recounted in the two documentaries, they can be summarized by stating that there was literally no distancing device, neither symbolic nor physical. The two films seem indeed to show a recurring phenomenon: when moving from the instigators and accomplices to the actual perpetrators, the attitude changes, the superficial self-justifications are abandoned in favor of open vindication, even boastful hilarity and seemingly carefree joy. Oppenheimer's executioners narrate and stage their misdeeds laughing exuberantly, emphasizing the details of the dexterity of the killings, showing off enjoying the recollection as much as they had enjoyed the original act.

So, Arendt's question reappears: what happens to a person who "has reached that point"? Is this joyful hilarity itself a distancing device? Is it possible that such individuals have always lacked, or have somehow managed to suppress within themselves, any form of — and the terms in the philosophical tradition have been multiple — empathy, sympathy, *Mitdasein*, respect for the humanity of the other, moral conscience, etc.?

In *The Claim of Reason*, Stanley Cavell wonders at one point if one can imagine individuals who are affected by what he calls "soul-blindness" (Cavell 1979b, 354–380). The section occurs in the context of a philosophical discussion on intersubjectivity and the problem of other minds that tries to develop Wittgenstein's reflections in the *Philosophical Investigations* in a direction not only epistemological and metaphysical, but ethical—albeit ethical in that modified sense that characterizes, for example, the "first" philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas, with whom Cavell would belatedly discover strong affinities (Cavell 2005, 132–154).

In Chapter XI of Part II of the *Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1958, 193–229), Wittgenstein applied his "grammatical" method (§ 90) to the study of cases, such as Jastrow's famous duck-rabbit, which might seem halfway between seeing and thinking, or between perceiving and interpreting. I suddenly notice the resemblance between two faces, or that a certain stylized duck can also be read as a rabbit; Wittgenstein, as is known, speaks in this regard of a "flashing" and of the "noticing" of an aspect, of "seeing as": seeing the figure as a rabbit, a triangle as an arrow, a face as resembling another, but also, and pertinently to our discussion on cinema and reenactment, a photograph as the object represented in it, or a box as a house in the context of a child's imaginative play of make-believe. The seeming paradox of these cases, in which "nothing has changed in what I see, yet everything looks different" (Baker 2004, 279), is resolved in the *Philosophical Investigations* by carefully describing the ways in which our perceptions structurally reconnect to things like our "attitude", "custom and upbringing", the ability to grasp an "internal relationship between [an object] and other objects" (Wittgenstein 1958, II, § 11), that is, in essence, to the main themes of the book: "language games", "forms of life" and "family resemblances". In some of its areas, human perception is dependent on the perspective, holistically embedded in that complex set of socio-cultural practices and natural reactions that Wittgenstein summarizes with the concept of form of life.

In the chapter in question, Wittgenstein does not explicitly describe the knowledge of other minds as a form of "seeing as", but in the rest of the book passages that draw this connection can be found. In § 420, for example, Wittgenstein suggests that the hypothetical case of someone who, through effort and imagination, managed to decondition themselves from their natural reactions to such an extent that they managed to "see a living human being as an automaton," to see him simply as a body without psyche, would be analogous to that of "seeing one figure as a limiting case or variant of another." Similarly, in § IV of Part II, Wittgenstein says that I do not "believe" that what I have in front of me is a human being, that "I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul"; rather, Wittgenstein continues, it is correct to say that "my attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul". This and other passages lead to the idea that intersubjectivity does not have a strictly cognitive base, that we treat other human beings as having a personal life, a psychic life, not so much because logical inferences have been made about their inner life from the observation of their external appearances; from a strictly cognitive point of view, in fact, such inferences are ultimately groundless, they could not withstand the stubborn objections of radical epistemological skepticism. Treating, seeing others

as beings endowed with a psychic life, therefore, depends on reactions and attitudes that are rooted in our natural history and cultural habits. “The human body — Wittgenstein famously writes—is the best picture of the human soul” (II § IV), and yet to those who persist in asking “why?” (why treat this being as a human being?) one can only respond as in § 217: “If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do.’”

In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell picks up and develops this Wittgensteinian connection between mechanisms of intersubjectivity and noticing an aspect. Three implications seem to interest him in particular. The connection between aspect seeing and imagination allows him to define imagination as the “capacity for making connections, seeing or realizing possibilities” (Cavell 1979b, 353), and to affirm that there is always an imaginative dimension in the apprehension of the other’s subjectivity: “Imagination is called for, faced with the other, when I have to take the facts in, realize the significance of what is going on, make the behavior real for myself, [...] for example, see his blink as a wince” (354). The second implication of the connection between intersubjectivity and seeing an aspect derives from the perspectival nature of the perceptions involved: “What is implied is that it is essential to knowing that something is human that we sometimes experience it as such, and sometimes do not, or fail to” (379). Our perception of the humanity of the other, of the existence of a psychic life with which we come into contact through their behaviors, instead of a mere body that can eventually be disposed of at will, is something intrinsically mobile and fragile, subject to our attitudes and conditioning, and therefore exposed to the risk of what elsewhere Cavell has defined as “failure to acknowledge” (Cavell 1969, 243), or even, in his famous essay on Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, as “avoidance” (246–325). A third and final implication stems from Wittgenstein’s hypothesis that there can be something like “aspect-blindness”, or “human beings lacking in the capacity to see something *as something*” (Wittgenstein 1958, II, § XI). This hypothesis translates for Cavell into the possibility of soul-blindness, the blindness to the human aspect that was introduced above and that can now be explored.

Cavell’s discussion focuses on the example of American slavery. Of the plantation slaveholder of the Southern states, it has often been said, and they themselves have said, that they did not see the slaves as human beings, but as objects or beasts of burden. Cavell contests this reading through an alternative description based on Wittgensteinian vocabulary. “What he [the slaveholder] really believes — Cavell begins — is not that slaves are not human beings, but that some human beings are slaves [...] this man *sees* certain human beings *as* slaves” (Cavell 1979b, 375, my emphasis). The slaveholder is not exhibiting an inability to see something in his slaves, to notice, for example, their human aspect. What, then, is he failing to grasp? Cavell continues:

What he is missing is not something about slaves exactly, and not exactly about human beings. He is rather missing something about himself, or rather something about his connection with these people, his internal relation with them, so to speak. When he wants to be served at table by a black hand, he would not be satisfied to be served by a black paw. When he rapes a slave or takes her as a concubine, he does not feel that he has, by that fact itself, embraced sodomy. When he tips a black taxi driver (something he never does with a white driver) it does not occur to him that he might more appropriately have patted the creature fondly on the side of the neck. He does not go to great lengths either to convert his horses to Christianity or to prevent their getting wind of it. Everything in his relation to his slaves shows that he treats them as more or less human — his humiliations of them, his disappointments, his jealousies, his fears, his punishments, his attachments... (Cavell 1979b, 376).

The slaveholder, in short, is not affected by soul-blindness (Cavell leaves open the more general question of whether anyone can ever really be soul-blind, even though he seems inclined to a negative answer). The slaveholder is not structurally incapable of grasping, from a perceptual or cognitive point of view, the human aspect of the people who are the object of his abuse or lack of consideration. What characterizes him is rather a self-ignorance, an ignorance of his own position, which originates, if we keep in mind the passage cited just above (the first of the three “implica-

tions”), in a lack of imagination: he does not know how to see his “connection with these people, his internal relation with them”.

The American philosopher adds:

So what is this about ‘not human beings’? [...] What do we imagine that he [the slaveholder] wants and sees and feels in saying it? [...] He means, and can mean, nothing definite. [...] He means, indefinitely, that there are *kinds* of humans [...] He need not deny the supremacy of justice; he may be eloquent on the subject. He need deny only that certain others are to be acknowledged as falling within its realm. It could be said that what he denies is that the slave is ‘other’, i.e. other to his one. They are as it were *merely* other; not simply separate, but different (Cavell 1979b, 376–377).

What happens, Hannah Arendt asked, to a person who “has reached that point”? A piece of the answer may be offered to us by this Cavellian reinterpretation of Wittgenstein’s concepts. It happens that a reciprocity is broken, that the face of the other, of Levinasian memory, is ignored, pushed outside that circle of moral consideration that here Cavell calls “justice” but which, far from being for him the place of a universally legislating reason, is rather conceived as the outcome of an exercise of imagination, as the ability to look perspectively at oneself and others in such a way as to grasp that “complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” which Wittgenstein calls “family resemblances” (Wittgenstein 1958, § 66–67). That the self-justifications of the Eichmanns, the Indonesian executioners, and the slaveholders are so dull and indefinite should not surprise us, if we agree with Cavell, because the ethical failure that characterizes them can indeed be described as a failure of imagination, a failure in the exercise, on one’s own perceptions, of that capacity for perspective shift that is inherent to our form of life.

A final step in *The Claim of Reason* also shows us what solution Cavell envisages for such a condition:

But should he [the slaveholder] cede, or they [the slaves] find, the power to acknowledge *him*, to see him as other to their one, power to see his experience as he sees it, then he would see himself though their eyes, and they would know that they had seen themselves through his, and he would number his days (Cavell 1979b, 377).

This solution is left here in a state of allusive indefiniteness: Cavell seems to think of devices that allow the re-establishment of reciprocity through the exercise of the imaginative art of perspective change, but he does not give us an example. He gives such examples elsewhere, in his writings on theater (Cavell 1987), cinema (Cavell 1981; 1996), and what he would later define as ‘moral perfectionism’ (Cavell 1990). For our part, however, we can return to Joshua Oppenheimer to show how his method of reenactment was precisely one of these devices.

Conclusion: The Act of Killing

The effects of the reenactment in *The Look of Silence*, in which actors and spectators do not coincide, are shown to be ambivalent. After watching the footage in which his brother’s assassins reenact their deeds, Adi chooses to track them down to share his experience with them, but he finds himself up against the proverbial wall of indifference, what Cavell would call avoidance of acknowledgment. They are now too old, or too encrusted in the status of untouchable, to understand the scope of their actions. Some threaten him, others recycle the old self-justifications full of bad faith; the daughter of one of them asks his forgiveness, but the impression is that she does so also for fear that Adi might be seeking revenge — and in any case, there would be very little that she could do or say on behalf of her father. Thus, if Adi seems to emerge from the events narrated having reached some measure of balance, a sense of pacification, the same cannot be said of his elderly mother, who, still in the last scene of the film, calls upon the spirit of her lost son and, decades later, cannot come to terms with his disappearance.

Quite different is the case of *The Act of Killing*, in which the elderly ex-gangster Anwar Congo is both the creator and performer of the reenactment, and its spectator and recipient. At the beginning of the procedure, Anwar appears to us like all the others: he recounts the facts carefree, boasts of the ingenuity with which he had devised new methods of murder, etc. At times, he admits to having sometimes dreamed of his own victims, of having been haunted by the thought of those to whom he had not “closed the eyes”, but in saying this he appears completely detached, devoid of any emotional reaction. However, things gradually change over the course of the cinematic reenactment, over the production, by the executioners, of the film within the film, and this, despite its amateurish nature, despite the grotesque lack of realism in the costumes, the settings, the acting.

The gestalt shift seems to occur through a three-phase process. In the first, having found himself for the first time acting in the role of a victim of torture, Anwar has an unexpected reaction: his body is suddenly seized by an uncontrollable feeling of terror, and he is forced to interrupt the shooting. His performance, the actorial make-believe, has allowed him to imagine himself, to feel like one of the victims, to understand how the victims feels looked at by the executioners and the way, in turn, they look at them. The second phase is triggered when Anwar himself asks to be able to watch the footage of that scene, as if driven by the curiosity to understand what really happened to him. “Did the people I tortured feel like I felt here?”, he asks in front of the monitor and, for the first time in tears, he begins to confess to the camera his dismay at what he had done “to so many people”. Finding himself in the role of the spectator allows him to let settle the awareness of the perspectival inversion he had experienced in a chaotic and visceral way during the performance, to go through a moment of that “catharsis” that Cavell, playing on a reversal of Aristotelian concept, describes on one occasion as intended “not to purge us of pity and terror, but to make us capable of feeling them again” (Cavell 1969, 319).

The third phase takes place when Anwar — we are now in the very last scene of *The Act of Killing* — returns to the back room where, as he had serenely told us at the beginning of the film, he had massacred all his victims. For a moment, he tries again to justify himself (“I know it’s wrong, but I had to do it”), but it is too late for this attitude, for this way of seeing things: his words are interrupted by a violent and endless bout of retching — unstoppable, deep retching, another physical reaction, this time even more uncontrollable than the previous one. The repressed has now resurfaced: Anwar becomes conscious of his “internal”, *visceral* relation with the people he had tortured and killed; he distinctly sees the rabbit-aspect that had until then been hidden from him, in plain sight under his eyes, by the duck-aspect. Now that he has looked at himself from the perspective of the victim, his days as an executioner are numbered, indeed they may have already ended by the moment we see him walk off-camera for the last time. Far from offering us a consolatory ending, however, his uncertain gait, that of a crushed and emptied-out old man, makes us wonder during the end credits whether his human days are also numbered, and under what conditions they can be lived.

Notes

- ¹ On documentary in particular, Cavell writes: “The documentary film-maker naturally feels the impulse to make his presence known to his audience, as if to justify his intrusion upon his subject. But this is a guilty impulse, produced, it may be, by the film-maker’s denial of the only thing that really matters: that the subject be allowed to reveal itself” (Cavell 1979a, 127).
- ² Besides Oppenheimer, the directors catalogued in Donghi 2024 include: Raed Andoni (*Ghost Hunting*, 2017); Lola Arias (*Teatro de guerra*, 2018); Marco Bellocchio (*Sorelle mai*, 2010); Mike Figgis (*The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001); Ari Folman (*Waltz with Bashir*, 2009); Patricio Guzmán (*Chile, la memoria obstinada*, 1997); Werner Herzog (*Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, 1997; *Wings of Hope*, 1998); Carl Javér (*Rekonstruktion Utøya*, 2018); Abbas Kiarostami (*Close Up*, 1990); Claude Lanzmann (*Shoah* 1985); Irene Lusztig (*Reconstruction*, 2001); Errol Morris (*The Thin Blue Line*, 1988); Guy Maddin (*My Winnipeg*, 2007); Mohsen Makhmalbaf (*Nun va goldun*, 1996); Avi Mograbi (*Z32*, 2008; *Between Fences*, 2016); Rithy Panh (*S-21, la machine de mort Khmère rouge*, 2003; *The Missing Picture*, 2013); Sarah Polley (*Stories We Tell*, 2012); Gianfranco Rosi (*El sicario - Room 164*, 2010), Zhang Yuan (*Sons*, 1996).

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Abubakar Gimba's Letter to the Unborn Child and the Ontological Masquerading of the Nigerian 'Being': An Existential Intervention

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Abstract: The idea of innatism projects the fact that humans have certain intrinsic characteristics, either good or bad; hence, some social behavior can be attributed to acquired traits. While the religious adherents (Christians and Muslims) will advance the argument that the 'being' has been corrupted before birth based on biological intercourse and the inherited nature of sin, the existentialist holds a contrary opinion to this. They are of the view that our choices transform who we are. Abubakar Gimba's letter to the unborn child projects an ontological deficiency in the Nigerian 'being', hence his epistle to the unborn child to prepare him not to be baptized into what is called the 'Nigerian character'. This work examines the description of what Gimba portrays to be an ontological deficiency and advances that Gimba's position is only a masquerading of existential choices resting upon key existential concepts. The work advances that existential conditions built over the years have suddenly seemed to appear as human nature. The work asserts that existential choice resting on responsibility remains the only path out of Nigeria's conditioning, which Gimba refers to as nature. The work concludes that, if Gimba's position of an ontological deficiency of the Nigerian 'being' is true, then not even his epistle to the unborn child could change the Nigerian fate, but since it is mere existential conditioning, then people's choices could birth the needed change.

Keywords: Thrownness, fallenness, facticity, ontology, existentialism

Introduction

The Nigerian state post-independence has witnessed several challenges despite her rich human resources and deposits of wealth in terms of mineral resources. The dreams and aspirations of many Nigerians who witnessed the independence seem to have faded away, with the younger generation laying hold of historical memories of a better yesterday. While the blame trail has become the watchword of successive democratic administrations, the younger generation has not taken their teeth from the very older generation, nailing them for the woes that have customized the country and made a mirage of the past historical heritage. The older generation has also blamed the younger generation for their naivety and lack of right judgement. The pictorial effect of this played out during the 2020 EndSars Protest in Nigeria. "When the most paramount slogan of the EndSars protesters was 'Soro Soke', meaning 'speak out loud', a figurative expression used in nailing the older generation as a generation that keeps silence while they watch social ills and injustice unfold, with the majority of them looking to the 'Supreme Being' for a solution"¹. Despite this trail of blame across several parties, the government and the Nigerian leadership have always been at the center of the backlash. Both the young and the old have constantly upheld the belief that the Nigerian prob-

lem is a leadership problem. The leadership circle in Nigeria that holds political offices represents less than 5% of the over 200 million population, and it is believed that they are responsible for the woes that are affecting the entire nation. To put things in proper perspective, the Nigerian problem is a problem of leadership. "This very view has been championed by many scholars, and it was explicitly emphasized by the late literary giant Chinua Achebe."² It is upon these premises and responding to the position of Achebe that Abubakar Gimba writes to express his view on the quagmire of the Nigerian state. This response is epistolary. He writes to an unborn child, x-raying the child's phases of existence, pre-and post-birth. In his letter, Gimba outlines various challenges facing the Nigerian state, which he hopes this unborn child will be able to navigate properly based on his epistolary notes. Gimba's letter began by painting the Nigerian problem to be ontological by emphasizing the Nigerian character. The implication is that, so long as you have been born a Nigerian, you carry this malady nature, hence, his only hope was to turn to the child who is yet to be born. The latter part of his letter projects more of an existential path to the problem of the Nigerian state by taking the responsibility of the Nigerian state from a group of collective individuals, also referred to as the Nigerian leaders, to the individual citizens, regarded as the followers. For Gimba, "a tree cannot produce a fruit different from its kind; hence, the Nigerian leaders are only a reflection of the average Nigerian."³ Although Gimba gave exceptions to a few individuals to avoid hasty generalizations, Gimba believes that if each citizen is responsibly playing their role for the betterment of the Nigerian state, little will be focused on the leadership.

It is upon this bedrock that this research work is set to analyze the ontological painting of the Nigerian nature in the epistle of Gimba to the unborn child and see how existential themes such as thrownness, facticity, fallenness, choice, and responsibility have contributed to what is being called the 'Nigerian character by Gimba' and how these themes are also instrumental to re-inventing a new Nigerian character.

Existentialism in Retrospect

Existentialism is nothing more than a philosophy of responsibility.

The word 'Existentialism' was first used by Soren Kierkegaard, but it was explored more by Jean-Paul Sartre in his work, *Existentialism is Humanism*. The center point of existentialism is the fact that "existence precedes essence"⁴, meaning individuals exist first before they decide their essence. To be clearer, when a potter is about to make an object, he first thinks of the function and purpose before designing and bringing the object into existence. This explains predestination or the fact that essence precedes existence, but for the existentialist, it is the belief that the object must first exist before its use and function are determined. How does it play out? Although the potter decides to make a pot, one can either decide to use the pot to cook, store grain or water, or leave the pot abandoned. The decision about what the pot will become comes after its existence. This is the trust of existentialists. "Either there is a supreme being or not, all existentialists believe that existence precedes essence."⁵ We have atheists like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Fredrick Nietzsche, and theists like Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Jasper, and Martin Buber. If the position of the existentialist is anything to go by, then a premium is placed on choice, freedom, and responsibility. Although all existentialists have different perspectives about existence, the uniformity of choice, freedom, and responsibility cuts across all existentialists. In the words of Soren Kierkegaard, "Man is constantly in anguish. This anguish is not caused by an external person but rather by being responsible for the choices one make."⁶ For the existentialist, man is always making a choice; even not making a choice is already a choice in itself. This choice that every individual makes has a way of affecting others. In the words of Sartre, he opines that "When I make a choice, I also make choices for others."⁷ This means that one's immediate choice at every point has a way of affecting others. It is upon this Sartrean position that Gimba's position becomes very justified when he claims that the woes of the nation of Nigeria are caused basically by individual failure. If one in his immediate workplace fails in his own respon-

sibility, it has a way of affecting everyone—a teacher who fails to pay attention to his pupils and neglects them will not produce properly baked students; by extension, this half-baked student will graduate and pass his or her own deficiencies to the other members of the society and, most unfortunately, to the unborn. Hence, it becomes necessary to begin an assessment of Gimba's epistle and see the existential arrow in it.

Throwness as Humans' First Metaphysical Conditioning

We do not have the power to choose whether to be born or not; we are simply thrown into the world. The word throwness was first used in the works of Martin Heidegger. He writes:

It is not the case that man 'is' and then has, by way of an extra, a relationship of being towards the world, a world with which he provides himself occasionally. *Dasein* is never 'proximally' an entity that is, so to speak, free from Being-in but which sometimes has the inclination to take up a 'relationship' with the world. Taking up relationships toward the world is possible only because *Dasein*, as Being-in-the-world, is as it is.⁸

What this means is that man simply finds himself existing in this world at a point without having any recollection of whether he existed before in a world or what his mission in this world should be. The life of man looks like when someone is simply thrown into a place and left to find meaning for himself without any map or direction.

Gimba also writes:

Whence comes my propitious dream? You are yet to bestride our physical world in this part of your life outside the womb. Yet you already belong to this world, though you are still outside it. You are yet to make your entry, which I am told before long you would, with a cry, as almost all of us that had made the same inevitable trip had done: a cry of joy or lamentation of a foreboding of a new life, full of tumbles and fumbles⁹.

Gimba began by explaining the existential predicament of every existing being: the fact that we are all thrown into this world without a choice of either being born or not. Gimba began thus: "In a few days, you will be making your personal entry into our country. You would be luckier than I was. You would have an entry port that would be more sanitized and more special than mine, with ladies in ceremonial dresses all over you... You would be born in a hospital unless you decide to give your mother a surprise and take your exit out without notice"¹⁰. Gimba was referring to the imminent arrival of the unborn child, who has no choice but to either come to this world or not come to this world. This is the existential fate of all. Individuals have no power to choose which country to be born in or the kind of parent they desire. Gimba went on to explain the first challenge facing this child, which is the predicament of his or her parents. Gimba writes,

Your father's only car broke down a few days ago as a result of engine trouble... You are his priority ahead of the car; hence, your father's savings are tailored more towards preparing for your arrival than the car. Your mother cannot help him financially. She depends on him. She does not engage herself in any gainful work that brings her any income. Sometimes she laments her decision to be a full-time wife. But she often takes solace in her mother's final parting words to her when she was getting married. You should be a supporter and an ever-constant comforter to your husband¹¹.

This becomes the immediate existential condition for this unborn child. These existential conditions have a way of shaping who the child will eventually become. Hence, one would still get to find out that, what Gimba painted to be an ontological condition of a child is most times a product of existential conditioning that has since looked like the nature of the 'being'. But no human exists without some sort of existential conditions that can affect their 'being'. Although some of these conditions are made worse by the choices of the parents, this can be justified when Gimba speaks about his own mother. When one compares the choice of the mother of the unborn child with that of Gimba's mother:

My mother, it may interest you to know, was a full-time housewife too; she was an adviser to my father. But she worked. She worked very hard on the farm, carrying out mopping-up operations in periods of harvest of Guinea corn, millet, rice, beans, and melon. She never sold them, though. She used almost all of it to feed the family and supplement what my father had. And out of the little she had, she gave to her mother, my maternal grandmother, and her neighbors¹².

If this child were asked to choose a parent, perhaps he would have wished for a working mother and probably chose to be born to Gimba's parents. This predicament of the to-be-born child was not just socially influenced nor was it an ordained destiny; rather, the choice of the parent contributed to it. Particularly the mother, who to me appears lazy. The child's parents seem poorer because only one hand is carrying the burden of the entire family. So many children are also born into the wrong hands today in Nigeria. Perhaps their lives would have been better, and maybe they could have made better decisions about life if they had been given birth to better parents who had the capacity to either guide or counsel them properly. Although this conditioning has little concern for existential decisions. Some were born with the same conditions and yet made good out of it. However, this does and should not cast aspersions on the credibility of these conditions and their effects on the makeup of a being. Again, so many problems affecting the Nigerian state today could be inherited traits of irresponsibility passed down from the parents to the children or from the older generation to the younger generation. By inheritance, one might want to allude to the ontological problem of 'the being' of an average Nigerian. One is most likely to become who begets him.

Again, this child has no power to make the choice of who becomes his/her parents and family members. In the words of Sartre and Heidegger, the child is still in the state of 'being-in-itself'. Kierkegaard "calls the stage in which this child is a wanton."¹³ This is a stage when one cannot make a choice. Hence, there is a need for one to move from the stage of being a wanton to the stage of becoming a person. Although one might wonder how Gimba was referring to a wanton or an 'in-itself' as described by other existentialist philosophers. In existentialism, a person called 'being-for-itself' has the capacity to relate to an 'in-itself'. In Buber's own words, the 'I-thou' can relate to the 'I-it'¹⁴. In existentialism, a person, also called 'being-for-itself', has the capacity to relate to an 'in-itself'. Aside from this, in Africa, there is a connection between the living, the dead, and the unborn. There is the belief that they have the capacity to interact effectively and communicate. Hence, it is normal for Africans to speak and pray for the unborn child in the womb while also offering sacrifices to the ancestors for their safety and preservation. In all, every child in Nigeria has this existential condition called throwness, but what each child is thrown into is either made better or worse based on the choices of the parents and the society. Throwness is an ontological condition of every human. As to who decides where a child is thrown, the theist existentialists might allude to the fact that God is behind an individual's throwness, while the atheist sees it as basically an existential condition based on circumstances or luck. However, within this throwness is the point that man must make choices as soon as he is born and has adequate mental and cognitive processes to make decisions. Meaning as soon as a child grows past the stage of being a 'wanton' or 'in-itself' to being a person or 'for-itself', the child becomes responsible for his choices. Even when a child is yet to be an adult, the choices they make have a way of shaping their immediate future. In the words of Sartre, he affirms that "Before I was born, I knew nothing about my existence, but as soon as I was born, I became responsible for all my actions."¹⁵ This implies that irrespective of the situation and what Heidegger refers to as man's facticity, man must still make choices. This will lead us to the facticity that has characterized Gimba's 'Nigerian Being.'

Facticity and the Challenge of a Nigerian Citizen

There is no human nature; what exists are human conditions; Facticity.
– Fredrick Nietzsche

While twins will have different human natures, they are most likely to have the same facts or human conditions. Nigerians are different in nature according to psychological classification, but one can say that Nigerians experience some conditions that are common to all. For instance, the economic situation of the Nigerian state, insecurity, poor power generation and supply, bad roads, poor educational standards, and bad social amenities and infrastructure could be seen as common conditions for all Nigerians. These conditions are most often caused by the choices of people, and they have a way of affecting others. This is highlighted in his work. Gimba said, noting the bad state of the medical facility in which the child will be born, which has constituted a sort of fact.

The nurses often ask women in labor to come with all manner of materials, from cotton wool to soap and razor blades. Do not ask me what they do with them. In most cases, they do not use them; the nurses resell them. The hospital pharmacist and doctors, perhaps, thought their support staff had this commercial smarts. Privately owned pharmacies are thriving in town, while the ones in public health institutions are abandoned drug stores. And the doctors? Well, the law allows them to eat their cake and have it¹⁶.

From the above, one could pinpoint that so many conditionings within the Nigerian State are an offshoot of people's bad decisions that have come to constantly hurt the entire public. Again, while we look at this facticity, the bailout might seem that we were all thrown into this world without our consent and we have to do everything to survive. Hence, this could be a valid justification for those who make choices that affect others negatively. Survival of the fittest replaces human facticity to become an ontological nature of existence; being justified in the descriptive state of nature by Thomas Hobbes. At some point, he highlighted the corruption that has engulfed government services and the school. In fact, he noted that his father's poor state was never a result of him not wanting to be rich, because the father has so much opportunity to be, but then he decided to make a choice that would protect his name and integrity. The bottom line of so many conditions in Nigeria that have become existential facts is that they are basically the choices of some people. So many people have witnessed 'death' being the end of all existential possibilities, not because it was meant to be but rather based on the failure of some people. Some people died due to bad jobs done by contractors or bad medical personnel services, among others. This fact becomes a chain and perhaps a rollercoaster for the Nigerian State. For Gimba, the existential facticity of the Nigerian state is such that it has remained at all levels; hence, the nature of the Nigerian man. However, in the actual sense of it, they are not the nature of the Nigerian 'being' but rather human-invented facticity. Gimba, expressing the depth of this thought, said, "Today's leadership was yesterday's followership."¹⁷ Meaning that these conditions have transcended the leadership problem. In alluding to this claim, he expresses the view of John Stuart Mill, who said, "Men are men before they are lawyers or physicians or merchants or manufacturers; if you make them capable and sensible men, they will make themselves capable lawyers and physicians."¹⁸ This implies that even if the mind of an average Nigerian is a tabular rasa at birth, existential facts that exist within the Nigerian state are capable of making them turn evil if they are not conscious of their actions. For Gimba, only a very few people have been able to rise above this fact; many have joined the crowd in a bid for survival. This falling with the crowd, which has become a problem in the Nigerian state, is what the existentialists refer to as fallenness, with the slogan, if you cannot beat them, you join them.

Fallenness and Pitfalls of Development

Man is at every point faced with an either-or situation: either to join the crowd and remain inauthentic or to take existential decisions, be responsible and authentic.
– Soren Kierkegaard

Heidegger began by using the word 'fallenness' after the 'they', which implies that when one decides to follow the crowd.¹⁹ For most existentialists, fallibility is seen as an act of inauthentic

existence. It is not as if existentialism rejects the idea of collective work. In fact, intersubjectivity is one core existential theme that supports collectivism; however, the point the existentialists stood against was losing one's self, uniqueness, and sense of individual responsibility by following the crowd. For the existentialist, it is believed that man must be responsible for his actions at all times. However, how they discuss fallibility differs. For Sartre, "fallenness means bad faith when one acts in self-deception"²⁰, while for Kierkegaard, "fallenness means not being responsible, like a mere spectator on the field of play"²¹. This research shall adopt the Kierkegaardian position because it resonates more with the position of Gimba. He writes on one aspect of what he conceives as fallenness:

displeasure at public phoniness makes some people withdraw from everyday social life, or what he calls 'actuality'. A few do so by moving to isolated areas, creating physical distances between themselves and society. Others, perhaps taking the more common route, withdraw inwardly. They continue to adhere to popular conventions, but they do so with an ironic attitude. In the privacy of their own minds, they do not take the conventions seriously or regard them as meaningful. They refuse to identify with the roles, projects, and values they have inherited from society. They tell themselves that such things do not really define who they are²².

This is what is regarded as fallenness; when one either decides to join the crowd, in the open or in secret, or when they decide to stay indifferent even when they could make a decision that could turn things around. This is the situation for many Nigerians. Pressure for survival has pushed many into joining those 'they cannot beat' instead of standing their ground to see that evil is not upheld. In the wake of this, very many Nigerians, though aware of the evil they are causing, are scared of what the crowd will say. Gimba, putting it forward as a great predicament that the unborn child will face, noted that:

There are many families like yours in Nigeria. There are many more parents like yours: simple, hardworking, honest, and humble. There are many fathers like yours who are principled enough to hold on to and hoist, whenever the situation demands, the flag of family and other cherished values. However, they all do not seem to make the desired level of impact in steering the nation in the direction of our dreams. They seem trapped, like the undergrowth in the mangrove forests, held down by the dominating thicket of the defiant deviants. A few determined parents like yours do, however, break through the suffocating canopy of the forest, like the Iroko trees in the rain forests, tall and strong, but the latter's determined defiance for the fresh air of the sky leaves little impression on the forest's skyline²³.

Here and in many other places, Gimba expresses the existential fallenness that has sunk the nation. Today, the clamor of the corruption that exists in the Nigerian states seems like something that is simply domiciled in the leadership, but in the actual sense, corruption is a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the root of the nation. Gimba expresses this all through his work. From the youngest to the eldest, corruption is the order of the day. It then even makes those who are not corrupt the bad ones in society. In the way Socrates was perceived as evil in the ancient Greek city during his time. So many people have fallen into a bad way of life or were raised in this bad way of life. The very few who are making the right decisions are doing so in a very serious, tense, and suffocating atmosphere, as Gimba puts it, and the light of their good deeds is not evident since it was done in a suffocating atmosphere. Existential fallenness is a plague that has become the Nigerian skin. Gimba, being aware of this, also tries to warn the unborn child against 'fallenness'. Gimba writes:

We are all leaders and followers alike, exposed to these hazards. You, too, would be. How then can we escape the fate of being drowned in the despised waters of our social values? No one, except those adequately prepared for it and given the right lifeboat, life buoy, and life jackets, expects impeachable leadership to emerge from an environment of pervasively decaying social values. No one except those properly brought up in homes with conscientious parents like your mom and dad... Your mother was not exposed to the defiling values of cultural modernization and imported civilizations. Your father, to his glory, has withstood their trials. He has refused to be false to himself and remains in quiet defiance of the bewitching influence and pressures of both modernity and civilization²⁴.

From the foregoing, one could see Gimba trying to encourage the unborn child to make sure he or she does not fall with the crowd. The very reason why he is being equipped early enough is so that he will be able to stand his ground. One noticeable thing about the above quote was when Gimba was describing his father. He said, "Your father has refused to be false to himself." Being false to oneself is what Sartre calls 'bad faith', while some other existential thinkers call it 'inauthentic existence'. As Gimba has highlighted in his work, very many Nigerians are living a false life of who they are, hence the Nigerian problem. An average Nigerian can talk about the solution to the problem facing the country; in fact, the Nigerian constitution looks perfect on paper, but the Nigerian state has failed at the implementation of policy because they have taken a different turn themselves by falling with the crowd. This is predicted to be the undoing of the Nigerian state. 'If you cannot beat them, join them'.

Having taken a critical look at the problem of the Nigerian state, it is necessary to look at the possible solution to the Nigerian predicament rooted in existential decisions, as highlighted by Gimba. Existentialism is not known to be a philosophy that leaves a problem as it is without addressing it. Inaction is an anti-existential philosophy. Hence, the path to a more progressive Nigeria needed to be sought out.

Choice and Responsibility as Ontological Paths to Development

If existence really does precede essence, "humanity" is responsible for who it is.

– Jean-Paul Sartre

Gimba made the Nigerian crisis ontological when he made some facticity become ontological nature. He writes:

You, in your present abode, the world of your mother's womb, have a rare purity and innocence that almost all of us on this side of our country have long lost. We are all, leaders and followers, contaminated to varying degrees, with the chemical mixture of the contamination acquiring a repulsive, putrid state when dropped in the milieu of actual or potential elevating opportunities. We are all in this pit of black dye together, and you cannot produce a yellow-dyed cloth from a pit full of black dye.²⁵

The above assertion from him implies that the predicament with the Nigerian state has become ontological, in the sense that being alive presently as a Nigerian implies for him that your ontology as a being has been contaminated; hence, Gimba's only hope is the unborn child still in the mother's womb. Just as the Biblical Jesus was made to come through a virgin to deliver the world by not contaminating his nature with the infusion of a man's sperm. Gimba noted that the Nigeria problem is not one-dimensional, but in his analysis, he explains how the entire evil has been mixed and seems inseparable from its being. Gimba writes:

our great writer's success (referring to Achebe) lies in his giving us a thesis for an ignoble scapegoatism. We have turned it into a dwarfing past time, nay, a character trait in us. We love to make someone a scapegoat for misadventures. The real problem is followership. All of us, simple. We are, individually, the real trouble with Nigeria. The character that Achebe cleared of any culpability is all that is wrong with us.²⁶

He further underscores the problem as ontological by saying, "Could the fault of the bitter, distasteful fruits that every season cycle brings from a tree be laid at the doorsteps of the fruits or at those of the tree that produces the fruits?"²⁷

However, Gimba's hope for the unborn child implies that this nature can be changed or re-invented. This hope represents an existential yet metaphysical path. First, Gimba came to terms with the fact that, although he feels Nigerians have an ontological problem, the problem is caused by the choices people make and those who refuse to take responsibility and not that the formation of the 'being' at birth was bad. If it were the latter, Gimba would not have had hope for the unborn child. It then implies that the Nigerian problem is not a general human ontological problem, because if it were,

even the unborn child would be irredeemable. What Gimba describes as an ontological problem for Nigerians could be perceived as habits that now seem innate. The Yoruba's would say, *ti ewe ba pe lara ose, a di ose*, meaning that if a leaf stays too long on a soap, such leaf will also become soap. Evil and malady have dwelled too long with Nigerians that it has made it seem that is a nature by birth. Hence, Gimba believes that if this unborn child is careful to make decisions that are different from what has masked itself as the Nigerian nature, this child might perhaps become the Jesus of the country and lead the country on a developmental path.

Gimba rightly noted that there have been supplications to the Supreme Being, and hence the imminent arrival of the child appears to be the answer to their prayer. He writes, "God may help us inspire ourselves. And I feel a sense of elation that your expected arrival is an answer by the Merciful Almighty to our prayers. But we must pray ceaselessly."²⁸

From the foregoing, man's ontological nature is characterized by making choices and being responsible for them. If there is one thing that is peculiar to all existing beings, it is not the uniformity of our facticity but rather the fact that we all have the power to make choices as soon as we are born. Even if there is a predestination, our choices still play a great role in the fulfillment of that destiny. Hence, Gimba spoke at length to the unborn child, but the change needed in Nigeria will not rest on the number of words that the child listens to from Gimba or from anybody else, but rather on the choices he makes.

The nation of Nigeria is where it is today because of choices made by people, and if it is to develop further, then it has to be based on the conscious choices and decisions that people will make. The Nigerian problem is not just bad leadership but also wrong choices made without taking responsibility for those choices. This is exactly the problem of the Nigerian state.

Nigerians must make choices that will positively influence and affect others. When these becomes the daily practice of Nigerians, then one could say that the nature of Nigerians has changed and Nigeria could be on the path to development. Sartre takes freedom as an ontological absolute, and it is only through our choices that we can make ourselves²⁹. Sartre opines that one's life is the sum of all decisions taken based on free will. The quagmire of Nigerian society is simply the result of the choices of Nigerians over time, and hence, no one is exonerated from the Nigerian crises. Until Nigerians see choices as the only tool they have and the only thing they share in common with other humans and learn to be responsible for the choices they make, nothing will change.

Conclusion

Man is no other than series of undertakings that he is the sum, the organization, the set of relations that constitute these undertakings. Man is a totality of his activities done in life.

He made many choices throughout the life...

– Jean Paul Sartre

This research has been able to underscore the position of Gimba about the Nigerian state as an ontological problem enveloped in what he tagged the Nigerian character. This work has brought out salient existential traits that Gimba has attributed to his work. The work hence sought to advance choice as the only human nature, the only setback of the Nigerian state, and the only path to the development of the same. Sartre said, "We first exist—find ourselves born into a world not of our own choosing—and it is up to each of us to define our identity or essential characteristics in the course of what we do in living our lives. Our essence (our set of defining traits) is chosen, not given."³⁰ Hence, Gimba's hope for the child is still based on the child's choice. Choice becomes an ontological attribute of humans that either makes them or destroys them. A country is not greater than the choices of its people—the tale of the Nigerian state.

Notes

- ¹ See punch newspaper of 15th June 2021, where sorosoke was discussed as a slang used by the Nigerian youths during the endsars protest.
- ² Achebe Chinua. (1985). *The Trouble with Nigeria*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers. 32.
- ³ Abubakar Gimba. (2008). *Letter to the Unborn Child*. Ibadan. Kraft Books Limited. 39.
- ⁴ Sartre, Jean-Paul. (2007). *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Translated. Carol Macomber. Yale UP. 6.
- ⁵ “Existentialism,” (1973). *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. Ed. Phillip P. Wiener. Vol. 2. 364.
- ⁶ Kierkegaard, S. (1971) *Either/or* vol. 1, Trans. Davis F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 281.
- ⁷ Sartre, Jean-Paul. (2007). *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Translated. Carol Macomber. Yale UP. 4.
- ⁸ Heidegger, Martin. (1956). ‘The Way back into the Ground of Metaphysics’, in Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. New York: World Publishing Co. 32.
- ⁹ Abubakar Gimba. (2008) *Letter to the Unborn Child*. Ibadan. Kraft Books Limited. 13.
- ¹⁰ Abubakar Gimba. (2008) *Letter to the Unborn Child*. Ibadan. Kraft Books Limited. 14.
- ¹¹ Abubakar Gimba. (2008) *Letter to the Unborn Child*. Ibadan. Kraft Books Limited. 24.
- ¹² Abubakar Gimba. (2008) *Letter to the Unborn Child*. Ibadan. Kraft Books Limited. 25.
- ¹³ Watts, M. (2007) *Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications. 189.
- ¹⁴ Buber, Martin. (1970) *I and Thou*. Translated by Kaufmann, W. New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s. 27.
- ¹⁵ Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1956) *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Translated. Hazel E. Barnes. Philosophical Library. 429.
- ¹⁶ Abubakar Gimba. (2008) *Letter to the Unborn Child*. Ibadan. Kraft Books Limited. 28.
- ¹⁷ Abubakar Gimba. (2008) *Letter to the Unborn Child*. Ibadan. Kraft Books Limited. 25.
- ¹⁸ Abubakar Gimba. (2008) *Letter to the Unborn Child*. Ibadan. Kraft Books Limited. 40.
- ¹⁹ Kockelmans, Joseph. (1965) *Martin Heidegger: A First Introduction to his Philosophy*. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press. 54.
- ²⁰ Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1956) *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Translated. Hazel E. Barnes. Philosophical Library. 321.
- ²¹ Gardiner, Patrick L. (1988) *Kierkegaard*. New York: Oxford University Press. 78.
- ²² Abubakar Gimba. (2008) *Letter to the Unborn Child*. Ibadan. Kraft Books Limited. 59.
- ²³ Abubakar Gimba. (2008) *Letter to the Unborn Child*. Ibadan. Kraft Books Limited. 59.
- ²⁴ Abubakar Gimba. (2008) *Letter to the Unborn Child*. Ibadan. Kraft Books Limited. 60.
- ²⁵ Abubakar Gimba. (2008) *Letter to the Unborn Child*. Ibadan. Kraft Books Limited. 21.
- ²⁶ Abubakar Gimba. (2008) *Letter to the Unborn Child*. Ibadan. Kraft Books Limited. 20.
- ²⁷ Abubakar Gimba. (2008) *Letter to the Unborn Child*. Ibadan. Kraft Books Limited. 39.
- ²⁸ Abubakar Gimba. (2008) *Letter to the Unborn Child*. Ibadan. Kraft Books Limited. 27.
- ²⁹ Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1997). *Foucault and Historical Reason, Toward an Existentialist Theory of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 50.
- ³⁰ Earnshaw, S. (2006). *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum International Publication Group. 48.

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Moral Luck and Accepting Responsibility in Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*

NIGEL RODENHURST & TRISTAN NASH

This essay makes a partial defence for the late Paul Auster's *Sunset Park* in relation to negative criticism that the novel received around the time of its publication. The theoretical framework applied is to view the novel as a literary example of the positions taken within the unresolved philosophical debate around 'moral luck'¹ being articulated through the process of storytelling. The 'Problem of Moral Luck' as conceived by Thomas Nagel (1979) is a perceived conflict between the view that people should only be held morally accountable for things that are under their control and everyday moral judgments that seem to hold people morally accountable for things which are not under their control. Nagel identified four different types of moral luck, three of which, it is argued, are relevant to *Sunset Park*.

The first of these is resultant moral luck. This refers to occasions where we hold people accountable for the results of their actions when the results of their actions are not under their control. For example, if there are two speeding motorists but only one of them has the misfortune to have a child run out in front of them, then they are typically held morally blameworthy for the death of the child, even though what is under their control is identical to the motorist who is fortunate enough that a child has run out in front of their car. Then there is circumstantial moral luck, which relates to holding people morally accountable for their actions, even though their actions are dependent on the circumstances they find themselves in and the circumstances are beyond their control. For example, we may hold a soldier responsible for their war crimes, even though had they not lived in a time of war they may have led a blameless life.

Constitutive moral luck concerns morally judging people for their character, even though the factors which have shaped their character – their genetics, their formative experiences, the time and place into which they are born – are outside of their control. Finally, causal moral luck is the term used for holding people morally accountable despite the fact that their actions are determined by antecedent events, and as such are not under their control. Andrew Latus (2014) argues that this form of moral luck is redundant, as the same issues are addressed by a combination of circumstantial and constitutive moral luck. For the purposes of this paper, we will adopt a similar position and not address this as a separate category for consideration.

All of the above applies to the western focus of this paper (British academics analysing an American novel). Cultures that are more fatalistic may not consider the problem that luck poses for moral responsibility. Within western thinking philosophers have taken various approaches to try and resolve this dilemma. There are those who deny the existence of moral luck by arguing that although luck influences the outcome of our actions, what we hold people morally accountable for are the factors which are under their control (Richards, 1986, Rescher, 1993, Rosebury, 1995, Thomson, 1993, Williams, 1976, Wolf, 2001). One form of this argument maintains that cases where it appears that people are being considered morally blameworthy for things which are not under their control are cases in which they are being held accountable for what can really be known about the situation (Richards, 1986; Rescher, 1993; Rosebury, 1995; Thomson, 1993). For example, if there are two

speeding motorists but only one of them has a child run out in front of them, then it appears, if we consider the motorist who hits the child more blameworthy, we are judging the motorist for what is not under their control. However, it is argued that we are judging the motorist who hits the child for their dangerous driving, and the evidence of their dangerous driving is the fact that they were unable to avoid the child that ran into the road. There is no such evidence for the other driver, as they did not hit anyone, which justifies the different level of blame we ascribe.

Another approach is to accept the presence of luck in our moral judgments and either revise our moral practices to reflect this fact (Browne, 1992) or argue that the control principle does not have the central role in our judgments that it is often thought to have (Walker, 1991). Susan Wolf (2001) draws a distinction between the rationalist and the irrationalist position on the problem of moral luck. The rationalist believes that one should only be held accountable for what is under one's control. Therefore, in the case of two speeding motorists, if one of them has a child run out in front of them and they hit and kill them, while the other is more fortunate and no child runs into their path, they should be judged equally. The irrationalist position is to judge them based on the consequences of their actions. This would mean that the motorist who kills the child deserves more blame than the one who is lucky enough not to have a child run into their path. Wolf attempts to reconcile these positions by arguing that the two motorists are equally blameworthy, but that the one whose actions resulted in the death of a child should accept a greater sense of blame for themselves due to the special connection they have to the consequences of their actions.²

The next section will provide a context to Auster's fictional oeuvre generally and then in relation to luck, chance and personal responsibility, as this is an area that academics, critics and readers generally have repeatedly found to be at the heart of his fiction. This will culminate with an overview of *Sunset Park* drawing criticism at a time when critics were questioning the repetitive nature of Auster's fiction. Having provided this author-centred context to compliment the theoretical framework outlined above, the final stage of the essay will be the analysis itself, in which positions taken, supported and criticised within the novel will be compared to the positions taken by the philosophers mentioned above concerning 'moral luck'.

Paul Auster's fiction has been analysed by critics in contexts related to metafiction, post-modern philosophy, life writing and Jewish-American socio-historical contexts for many years. For example, Mark Brown (2007, p.26) argued that Auster's concern is primarily with loneliness and/or connectedness in the postmodern metropolis, citing his links to Reznikoff, Rakosi and Oppen in terms of the Objectivist project to 'locate the poet between the material world and the verbal world'. Tom Theobald (2010, p.69) related Auster's prose to the writing of Sartre, Camus, Blanchot and Merleau-Ponty, in terms of the existential dilemmas facing his protagonists.

Most of his novels are set in a recognizable American historical moment and include several persistent themes and traits. For example, the protagonists are usually male, American and share other similarities with their author, such as being writers or other kinds of artists, or attending colleges and inhabiting New York neighbourhoods at times when it is known that Auster did the same. Auster also often inserts passages that detail historical events or political perspectives alongside the private lives of his characters. It is almost certain that many of the events and incidents described in *The Invention of Solitude* are taken directly from Auster's own experience. The use of a second person narrative and a 'character' called 'A' have led some to the conclusion that this book should not be looked upon as straightforward autobiography, but rather as a generic experiment. This left Auster with the option of distancing himself from actions, emotions and motives for which we have only his word. Thus Brendan Martin (2008, p.11) argued that 'Auster removes the mantle of authorial control and encourage [sic] his readership to question the concept of conventional truth'.

Furthermore, Auster, throughout his oeuvre, developed his interest in chance, particularly the difficulty of planning and building for the future whilst knowing that this can be disrupted without warning by random events. In *The Red Notebook* Auster describes at the age of 14 being in close

proximity to a boy who was struck by lightning. This random ‘act of God’ style intervention re-emerges as a meta-text (Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon*) in *Oracle Night* and then again in Auster’s 4-3-2-1, a novel that is a padded ‘Sliding Doors’ narrative based entirely on the premise of what might have happened to the protagonist had he turned different metaphorical corners at different times. All of the above invites author centred or biographical readings of Auster’s fiction, because so often ‘real’ events from his extensive autobiographical non-fiction writing are reconfigured into his fiction. Auster also gave many interviews in which he confirmed positions taken by protagonists and narrators relating to historical events in his fiction as matching his own.³ However, the constant unsubtle metafictional flourishes of his fiction act as a kind of literary caveat to such straightforward or literal approaches.

In Auster’s earlier career this was largely appreciated by academics who were grateful that his novels were handy for teaching literary theory and fans and critics who found his Vietnam era spirit and slick, noir narratives ‘cool’. However, from the late 1990s Auster was on the receiving end of some negative reviews, particularly concerning the repetitive nature of his fiction. Joanna Briscoe, reviewing *Invisible*, stated that Paul Auster had ‘created what amounts to his own, self referential fictional world over the years’. This is particularly the case as far as the perhaps self-mocking presence of ‘a notably gorgeous and intellectually gifted Jewish American, born in the same year as Paul Auster’ is concerned (Briscoe, 2009).

The division between critics who had bought into Auster’s recognizable fiction and those who expressed their boredom with its repetitions peaked with the publication of *Sunset Park*. Some critics praised Auster’s engagement with real world issues such as financial recession and evictions in America and Auster’s attempts to create characters not of his own generation. Brandon Robshaw (2011), for instance, praised the novel in the following terms: ‘There are no minor characters in Auster’s world – everyone has a rich, complicated biography and inner life, and their own dilemmas to deal with’. Others were less convinced. For instance, a review in the *New Yorker* (2010) argued that events in *Sunset Park*:

would fit comfortably into any of the author’s previous works, as would shopworn observations like “The entire story of his life hinges on what happened that day.” Auster’s usual motifs—a figure who disappears from his own life, a prominent role for chance and coincidence, an obsession with baseball and old movies—eventually take over the novel, with familiar results.

Arifa Akbar (2010) noted that Auster’s ‘old man cycle’ of novels was over and that his young, ethnically diverse characters are ‘hastily imagined’, while Rodney Welch (2010) added that:

In the end, “Sunset Park” feels like a needless bid for relevancy, an attempt to engage with the post-crash, post-literate, homeless culture, rigged to let Auster address whatever was on his mind when he sat down to write. He even shuts down the book for five pages to extol the virtues of PEN International. The result is a very moody “mood of the country” novel, a book of many parts that never really cohere in a satisfying way.

This essay in part agrees with the critics who found *Sunset Park* repetitive in terms of Auster’s preoccupations and themes and found the broader demographic spectrum of characters who interact with the main protagonist contrived and unconvincing. *Sunset Park*, like *The Brooklyn Follies*, branches out from the main or central characters, giving voices to other tangential characters through their own chapters. The back stories of Alice Bergstrom, Ellen Brice and Mary Lee Swan do present as a very clumsy and tortured attempt to insert female perspectives into the novel. This could be judged as an attempt to respond to criticism of male authored fiction generally, however Auster here only proved what many of his critics already felt – that his fictional imagination and projection of perspective were limited by gender. His earlier novels which stayed true to that, including *The New York Trilogy*, *Leviathan* and *Moon Palace*, certainly come across as authentic in their characterisation, despite the obvious metafictional games and autobiographical teasing.

The central narrative arc of the novel revolves around Miles Heller's trajectory from academic high achiever and future star to recluse and blue-collar worker in Florida and finally living as a squatter with an eclectic group in Sunset Park, New York, set against the backdrop of his childhood and one chance event that changed everything. *Sunset Park* is saturated in examples of chance, happenstance and coincidence relating to characters external to the novel, that defy expectation and belief, sometimes juxtaposed with examples of people who are said to have orchestrated their own downfall by poor decision making (41–42). The central characters of the novel, Miles Heller and his father Morris in particular, are heavily preoccupied with this. A baseball player's promising career ends because of an injury, but the same injury keeps him out of World War II (164). Another character nicknamed "Lucky" cheats death on several occasions, but also misses opportunities because of chance, before finally running out of luck (299). Other characters' lives change course because of sudden, unexpected bereavements. The caveat, as throughout Auster's fiction, is in place – life is random and unpredictable. Nobody can fully control their outcomes through their actions. However, as will be argued below, this novel does feature a much more nuanced debate concerning moral luck and personal responsibility, through the story of Miles Heller, who at the age of 16 accidentally kills his stepbrother Bobby during a minor family squabble by pushing him and causing him to be hit by a car.

Regardless of any 'changes' in the historical setting and generational characteristics of Auster's central characters, *Sunset Park* continues Auster's tendency towards self-explanation in fiction and non-fiction that David Brauner (2001) diagnosed in Jewish fiction generally, and the motif of self-defence that Brauner found in Philip Roth's fiction specifically.⁴ This is particularly the case in Auster's writing that is read as being related to the demise of his first marriage, to the writer Lydia Davies, largely caused by Auster's ambition to live as an author, and the knock-on effect that this had on their son, Daniel. What endures in the reader's mind from the passage in *Hand to Mouth* (1997, 108–26) in which Auster narrates this period of his career, in spite of the immense distress that his divorce caused him (along with his separation from his son Daniel and the death of his father in 1979), is his abject lack of regret for the sacrifices that he made for his career. This is often matched in his earlier fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, with protagonists' outcomes being heavily guided by chance events and their choices largely supported (or at least rarely criticised) through narrative interventions. What is different in Auster's later writing, is that there is an increased tendency towards representing and dwelling on remorse and prolonged suffering for mistakes, as exemplified in *Sunset Park*, in which the young protagonist pays repeatedly for one youthful misjudgement.

It is in relation to this, that this essay will investigate the way in which Auster's 'repetitive' motif of chance interacts with the equally repetitive themes of personal responsibility for and consequences of choices made by the individual in *Sunset Park*. It is not the intention to apply this to an author-centred reading. As outlined above, others well might. However, the analysis in this essay applies directly to the text, with no prurient or salacious judgement applied. It must be kept in mind as the philosophical positions are discussed, that we are addressing fiction, and metafiction at that.

The scenario regarding Bobby's death meets Nagel's criteria for both resultant moral luck and circumstantial moral luck. The result was Bobby's death, which the reader is initially told was an unforeseeable accident. However, we are later told that Miles is unsure whether he heard the car coming (25) before he shoved his brother and reminded of Miles's tendency towards rage (131). In any case, Miles shoved his brother in the midst of a verbal altercation and his brother died as a result. The key circumstance was that 'he had been walking on Bobby's right side instead of his left' (19). If this had not been the circumstance (circumstantial moral luck) or had Bobby being pushed not resulted in him being hit by a car (resultant moral luck), the incident 'would have been forgotten in no time at all' (19–20).

Miles is unable to forgive himself or see himself as not responsible for Bobby's death and as a result withdraws from his previously structured and future oriented life. He becomes a withdrawn and

reclusive character who responds to chance and random events generally by making the topic a fetish or a hobby that he half seriously researches and taking an ascetic approach to life, without ambition and having as few wants and needs 'as humanly possible' (6). This, and Miles's rage towards Bobby on the day of the accident, is strongly related to his upbringing (constitutive moral luck), which is covered in depth in the fourth chapter. His mother left him and his father, causing Miles to feel like 'a black speck in a world made of snow' (68). His father Morris states that by the time Miles attached to his stepmother Willa, 'it was probably too late' (28). This is made more complex by Bobby's actions that had angered Miles prior to the shove, and which were a circumstantial result of Bobby's irresponsible and fatalistic attitude, related to his own constitutive circumstances of his father's random death and his mother preferring Miles to him. Of the two, at the time, it is Miles who is more connected to personal responsibility for his actions.

Having re-engaged with life somewhat through his relationship with Pilar, for whom he does hope for a better future, Miles once again finds himself having to withdraw after intervening in an incident of police brutality during an eviction from the squat in Sunset Park. Like the incident with Bobby, and another earlier incident which caused him to flee Florida, this is a spur of the moment incident which relates to circumstantial moral luck but is again underpinned by Miles's rage when he reacts by punching a police officer. He has never fully disconnected from the notion of luck as a defining factor in his outcomes, having seen meeting Pilar as 'a small piece of luck he stumbled across one afternoon in a public park, an exception to every rule' (13). He then described having to leave Florida after being assaulted as 'another fluke in a world of flukes and endless mayhem'. Finally, as he flees legal justice for assaulting the police officer in Sunset Park, he reiterates his original, pre-Pilar philosophy:

'...he wonders if it is worth hoping for the future, and from now on, he tells himself, he will stop hoping for anything and live only for now, this moment, this passing moment, the now that is here and then not here, the now that is gone forever' (308).

Miles's attitude towards the situation is an example of the paradox of the problem of moral luck, as despite acknowledging the role that luck played in his situation, he is earnest in his wish to take responsibility for his actions and to punish himself if the legal system does not. This demonstrates that he can hold the paradoxical position of both believing that the events that led to Bobby's death were largely outside of his control, at the same time as holding himself completely responsible. However, other characters in the novel such as Bobby's mother Willa, either see the event as an accident and do not hold Miles responsible, or, in the case of Miles's father Morris, adopt the position of denying the problem of moral luck, by only holding Miles responsible for what is under his control and as a result seeing the incident as 'banal', an 'adolescent spat' (276).

However, Morris also offers another position which hints at a more nuanced approach which could be analysed in light of Wolf's (2001) position in relation to moral luck. Wolf argues that despite the fact that we should adopt a rationalist approach and only hold people blameworthy for what was under their control, people should still accept a greater sense of responsibility for themselves for harm that results from their actions, even if this resulting harm is not under their control. Accordingly, despite Morris not holding Miles responsible for Bobby's death, he still thinks Miles 'must be forgiven' (277). He acknowledges that the sense of responsibility that Miles feels is appropriate despite him not being blameworthy, and that this sense of responsibility needs to be addressed by forgiveness. Such a position may seem incoherent for those who seek to deny the existence of moral luck in such cases (Richards, 1986; Rescher, 1993; Rosebury, 1995; Thomson, 1993), as they would argue Miles can only be held accountable for what is under his control. However, as a reader, we would surely feel differently about Miles if he did not take on this sense of responsibility and only took responsibility for the actions that were under his control, dismissing it, as Morris does, as 'banal', an 'adolescent spat' (276). The sense of responsibility that Miles feels is what Wolf (2001) describes as a 'nameless virtue' (13), taking responsibility for what results from our actions rather than just what we had intended.

Other characters in the novel take a stance regarding continuing to take personal responsibility for the future despite the possibility of random events dictating outcomes. Morris Heller strongly argues that mistakes can be rectified when he discusses trying to recover his marriage after infidelity (172) and when he tells Miles to 'stand up and face the music' (306). Bing Nathan works to find reassurance in his principles and repeated patterns of everyday life (73–75). Even Miles rants about the results of the Bush administration's policy in Iraq (46) and in relation to a story about two men who reacted differently to bad luck states that: 'It's a question of character [...] every man is different from every other man' (44–45). He understands the difference between intention, premeditation and moral luck, but is ultimately unable to forgive himself. This is the paradox of personal feelings of guilt and responsibility versus theoretical morality that is at the centre of the novel's plot.

An additional level of complexity to Miles's struggle with moral luck, responsibility, guilt and penitence is his problematic relationship with Pilar Sanchez. At first blush this relationship may appear exploitative because Pilar is much younger than Miles and technically underage in the state of Florida. He takes a pedagogical, Henry Higgins style approach towards her, from their first meeting when he is 'impressed' that she reads 'for herself' rather than following curriculum requirements (10). Later he appoints himself her reading mentor, recommends texts (49), and almost decides from the beginning that he will correct his own wasted potential through her, that he will career counsel her towards good exam results, a good college and a high-status career rather than her own stated ambition to be a registered nurse (11–12). He makes assumptions about what she should want. On face value, the relationship sounds manipulative and controlling, but Miles is reconnecting to ambition, hope and just outcomes without guilt by supporting someone from a disadvantaged background towards success through hard work. This relationship serves to further illustrate that Miles can understand moral luck and that people should move through life purposefully despite its random potential, but that he cannot apply this to himself.

Having analysed the central event and plot line in *Sunset Park* in relation to the philosophical debate around moral luck, this essay now concludes with a partial defence of the novel and Auster's work generally in relation to criticism that has been levelled against him, as discussed above. American fiction in general has continuously been viewed through the lens of Philip Rahv's (1940) influential statement that American novelists show a "unique indifference...to ideas generally, to theories of value, to the wit of the speculative and problematical" (360). Compare this to Sean O'Hagan's take on Paul Auster (2004) in which it is outlined that Auster is popular in France, where 'metafiction' is admired, but less revered in America where critics feel that those who undertake such experiments know that 'the harder it is to be pinned down on any idea, the easier it is to conceal that one has no ideas at all' (35). The paradox here is that novelists are sure to be shot down by critics whether they attempt to engage with political and philosophical issues through realistic representation or whether they eschew this in favour of metafictional forms that appear to deflect a grounded approach to morality and personal responsibility.

Paul Auster's *Sunset Park* can be read as a peevish retaliation to this predictable critical response to his work and to the sheer inevitability of not being able to please everyone. Auster's entire fictional oeuvre, as outlined above, has persistently featured metafictional flourishes and disclaimers from his narrators and characters, and has repeatedly returned to themes of chance, luck and responsibility. Following the criticism of Joanne Briscoe (2009) among others about his previous novel, Auster appeared in *Sunset Park* to have responded by creating Miles, a character who is everything Briscoe slated. Almost everyone in the novel, male or female, is attracted to him. His sophistry and ascetic thinking in response to a random life changing event are a hyperbolic parody of Auster's earlier protagonists. An example of this is through Morris's perspective, recalling the earnest and self-serious younger Miles constructing a trite reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird* based on the idea that 'until you are wounded, you cannot become a man' (186). Miles is far more hysterical than, for example, Benjamin Sachs in *Leviathan*, but essentially he trots out the same schtick. His relationship with Pilar

was surely intended to raise judgemental eyebrows and the extent to which he takes himself seriously was surely intended test readers' sympathy.

Miles is not the only character within the novel to appear ludicrous precisely at the point of giving their ideas an elevated status. Morris Heller and Bing Nathan are especially prone to this. Morris's equation of blue-collar work to 'hell' when considering Miles's penance surely plays up to stereotypes of Jewish Americans (276–77). Bing is introduced as the 'warrior of outrage, the champion of discontent' (71), but this grandiose language is undercut by the narrator's actual descriptions of him as a 'sloppy' person (75) who resorts to 'petty' acts of rebellion (72). He is nonetheless shown to be treacherous in stealing one of his fellow squatters' boyfriends, however even this is brushed aside as a misguided attempt to explore his deep attraction to Miles (290–91).

In reacting to this, critics may have taken Auster a little too seriously and forgotten that *Sunset Park* is a novel, not a philosophical tract or a pitch to resolve a contentious moral, political or legal issue. Indeed the novel, even in the present day, is still in Trilling's (1950) terms a potential defence for the idiosyncratic self and possibly the last bulwark in contemporary culture against sanctimony. Malena Watrous (2010) in anticipating the flood of criticism towards the novel partly defended *Sunset Park* by pointing out that Auster was 'right that the rules of fiction should be bent. Writers not always determined to please the reader are the ones who break new ground'. It is fair to point out that *Sunset Park* falls a long way short Bakhtin's (1984) conception of a Dostoyevskian novel, and that Auster does not succeed in representing the ideas of all of his characters in terms of how the younger (and in particular the female) characters are conceived and imagined. However, there is a genuinely dialogic aspect around the theme of moral luck that brings fiction's own representational power of inner and outer dialogue to the serious philosophical topic. Whilst pushing the boundaries of credibility, even by his own standards and whilst thumbing his nose at his detractors, Auster presented within *Sunset Park* a compelling fictional exploration of the unresolved and quite possibly unresolvable philosophical debate around moral luck. Predictably and disappointingly, his critics overlooked this and simply pointed out that he had once more reverted to old tropes and tired themes.

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Notes

¹ The modern debate on the problem of moral luck was sparked by the paper B. A. O. Williams & T. Nagel (1976). Moral Luck. Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 50 (1):115–152.

² A detailed overview of the problem of moral luck can be in Nelkin, Dana K. (Spring, 2023) "Moral Luck", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/moral-luck/>>.

³ See for example 'In Conversation: Paul Auster with John Reed', The Brooklyn Rail, August/September 2003, pp. 23–24.

⁴ See Brauner, Chapter 2: 'The Trials of Nathan Zuckerman, or Jewry as jury: judging Jews in Zuckerman Bound', in *Philip Roth*, pp. 21–45.

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Biblical Intertextuality, Nissim Ezekiel and the Jungian “Enterprise”

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that Nissim Ezekiel’s “Enterprise”, first published in *The Unfinished Man* (1960), strongly alludes to the Book of Job from the Old Testament of the Bible. Through intertextual and interdisciplinary readings, one can discern how the shadow that falls upon the characters of Ezekiel’s poem during the pilgrimage possesses the characteristics of Yahweh’s shadow that falls upon Job, and becomes directly responsible for his decrepitude. The shadow grows in both texts because the Supreme Unconscious (God) is indifferent to(wards) the human condition, and to the consequences of an apocalyptic aftermath, as illustrated in C.G. Jung’s *Answer to Job*. Their spiritual and moral states are restored upon two conditions – the protagonist’s internalization of both human struggle and divine wrath makes him resilient towards both, creating the theoretical premise for the resolution of their antinomy, followed by the evocation of the sublime that resists annihilation as well as the catastrophe of extreme suffering. It leads to the substitution of the poem’s theoretical framework from “the good of God” to the “agon of the Go(o)d”, as I argue towards the conclusion of the paper.

Keywords: Intertextuality, The Book of Job, sublime, interdisciplinary reading, Jung.

Introduction

There is, in the second stanza of Ezekiel’s critically acclaimed poem, “Enterprise”, a conceptual impasse not adequately traced from a psycho-religious point of view, although, at least one critic has identified the (ambivalent) religiosity in the poetic objective, and the poetic self *per se*¹:

But when the differences arose
On how to cross a desert patch,
We lost a friend whose stylish prose
Was quite the best of all our batch.
A shadow falls on us – and grows.

(Gokak ed., p. 267, ll. 11–15, both forms of emphasis mine)

While cultural interpretation of the event, weaved into its anecdotal form, abounds in most literary remarks on the poem, I offer a different version of the conceptual impasse mentioned earlier – the “shadow” that falls on the aspirants is, to begin with, the same shadow that fell on Job in the Old Testament of the Bible – the shadow of God. In *Job* 17:7, where the protagonist is locked in an argument with Eliphaz, attempting to rationalize the wrath incurred against him by God, he acknowledges that:

My eyes have grown dim with grief;
My whole frame is but a shadow.

(New International Version, Varkey & Varkey ed., p. 59)

The “grief” experienced, and expressed by Job is rephrased into the less dramatic “fall”, whose interpretation, seconding my first argument, is equally Biblical, as it refers to the Fall of Man in the Book of Genesis. Interestingly enough, while the physiological aspect of Job emerges from the loss of personal property (family included), the immediate difference he draws is from the reconciliatory arguments of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, with the need to internalize God’s anger without assuming his ontology. This is restructured, if not re-acculturated by Ezekiel when the “differences arose” in his group, in the same way that the lack of material prosperity marks the locus of difference between divine worship and a dehumanized Job. It is referred to in Ezekiel’s remarkable pun on the word “Cross”, which symbolized its Biblical resemblance (Christ’s crucifixion) as well as the Job-like annoyance (“cross”), arising when differences became too difficult to bridge. Similarly, while Job’s “whole frame” has ceased assuming corporeal value, having been reduced to a shadow by God’s excessive, if not irrational light, it is worked into the verse-paragraph through Ezekiel’s reference to how “stylish prose” kept alive the framework of his group. This is consonant with the idea of how Job’s eyesight is lost, or blinded by supererogatory grief, in the same way that Ezekiel’s group “lost” sight of their friend – hence the connotative value of this comparison.

Ezekiel’s “Enterprise” as an Intertext of the Book of Job

Up till this point, I have argued how “Enterprise”, and its ideological argument is characteristic of the chief argument in the Book of Job, but it does not state why the shadow of Job’s God is indebted to, and is exactly like the shadow cast by Ezekiel’s God in the poem. In a bid to remain faithful to the chronology of the texts and their Gods, I will first attempt an interpretation of the shadow in the former; in Carl Gustav Jung’s *Answer to Job*, he justifies why it *is* the shadow of God, and why Job is not reduced to an inferior version of himself, but a defeated face of God:

Truly, Yahweh can do all things and permits himself all things without batting an eyelid. With *brazen countenance* he can project his shadow side and remain unconscious at man’s expense. He can boast of his superior power and enact laws which means less than air to him. (R.F.C. Hull tr., 597, my emphasis)

In other words, Job’s frame is reduced to a shadow, not because he has acted morally or immorally; it is because God is too bright to remain faithful to the moral code of conduct. The projection, albeit apocalyptic, is the cause of indirect material, moral, physiological, and spiritual collapse of Job, who is now the direct recipient of an apocalyptic aftermath, and a representative of humanity as it tends to adjust itself *consciously* with the “brazen countenance” of the supreme unconscious. In a similar fashion, Ezekiel’s Job, as a whole, is confounded by the “brazen countenance” of a “desert patch”, symbolic of apocalyptic extremes. This is cited as divine, unconscious obstruction to conscious, human objectives, the consequence of which is defection, in the same way that the loyal Job defects from his unquestionable adherence to Yahweh. Reiterating this point is the fact that Job was his most faithful follower – ironically, his “best” – a careful imbrication of the Biblical and the human. Jung becomes more specific in his characterization of the “shadow” in “Conscious, Unconscious and Individuation”:

Like the anima, it [the shadow] appears either in projection on suitable persons, or personified as such in dreams. The shadow coincides with the “personal” unconscious (which corresponds to Freud’s conception of the unconscious). Again, like the anima, this figure has often been portrayed by poets and writers. (R.F.C. Hull tr., p. 284)

If the projection is most perfect on the most “suitable persons”, then both Job, and Ezekiel’s friend, whose prose was “quite the best”, qualify as the most “suitable persons” for the manifestation of God’s shadow. To what extent are their personifications dream-like? Both Job and Ezekiel’s group are exposed to the ideological underside of their great enterprise – the false consciousness of remaining infinitely loyal to the “idea” of God, cleverly worked into the (un)fulfilment of human objectives

when journeying towards a pilgrimage. Following this is the coincidental amalgamation with the “personal unconscious”, revealed accurately by God’s atrocity upon Job in 7:14 and 7:15.² Since Jung mentions Freudian unconscious by name, one can opine that the “desert patch” is symbolic of the return of the repressed – a topographic uncanny that halts the group, dead on its tracks, an obstruction that was only real in their dreams, but no longer. I heap ideological similarities between these two texts with the intention of asserting how the shadows in both texts are Godly (one could also say God-lie, meaning the lie of the “true”, subjugated under the “power” of God) – devoid rightfully of the rationale, and are depictions of an apocalyptic aftermath. As Job’s friend Bildad confesses, even the non/indirect recipient of Yahweh’s shadow should not discourse upon God’s extra-intellectual framework, since power cannot be discoursed by conscious, human reason:

For we were born only yesterday and know nothing,
And our days on earth are but a shadow.
Will they not instruct you and tell you?
Will they not bring forth words from their understanding?

(ibid. 8:9, 8:10, p. 26–27)

Citing transitoriness as the sole reason for human reticence against divine power, Bildad obstructs Job’s thought by reminding him of the destiny of the (entire) human community, should God retaliate. Pedagogical conscience becomes a stumbling block against the positive consequences of the *agon* against Yahweh’s judgment. This, however, is one half of the argument; one continues to be intrigued by the more difficult question: why does the shadow continue to grow? As Ezekiel emphasizes, the defection of one could result in the consolidation of the rest, which does not happen, for two reasons: one, the characters of “Enterprise” are pitted against something more formidable than the human, which forms a section of the major argument. This (divine) formidability is posed no/minimal risk from human endeavours pertaining to resistance – an argument certainly applicable to Job, as demonstrated by Jung in *Answer to Job*.³ That Yahweh must present himself to reinforce his power over mankind exposes divine fragility to an extent, but God shows more concern for wavering hegemony than wavering power. Secondly, the shadow continues to grow because the subject of resistance, God himself, cannot be adequately objectified; hence, its ethereal/universal element eludes consolidated, human resistance. This too, is not the line of argument deemed applicable for the present paper. Instead, I argue that the shadow continues to grow, because God, being the Supreme Unconscious, is blissfully ignorant of the human, conscious condition, which is nothing but an accidental product of an apocalyptic aftermath, from a psycho-religious perspective. The Book of Job provides a near-perfect example of this inconsiderate, divine influx when Elihu instructs Job of the Jungian God’s “blazing countenance”:

For God does speak – now one way, now another –
Though no one perceives it.
In a dream, in a vision of the night,
When deep sleep falls on people
As they slumber in their beds,
He may speak in their ears
And terrify them with warnings,

(ibid., 33:14–16)

Notice that God “does speak”, implying the articulative power of the divine, but it is accompanied by a divine paradox – if divine articulation stands under no obligation to communicate with other divine, or extra-divine fealties, one has every reason to doubt whether divine articulation is an ideological, linguistic and rhetorical fallacy, since nobody “perceives” or understands it. Complicating this is the shadow caused by uncommunicative yet articulate, divine power, for alienation from divine language means not only the faith in nothingness, but the aftermath of that wrath incurred

when the inarticulate, hence powerful, holds man responsible for not decrypting his linguistic code. Nor can man be rightfully held culpable for not decrypting divine speech, for it articulates itself “in a dream”, or “in a vision of the night” – in other words, in the unconscious terrain of man, infiltrating absence with presence and suspending conscious structures for the benefit of human articulation. Complicating this further is the “terrifying” dimension of God, which is structured around the application of one demeanour to its theoretical extreme, without the capacity for tempering. If one operates with the presumption that the “dream” and “night” are both human, it is reasonable to conclude that Job and God are antinomial to each other, figuratively enacting the apparent, antinomial status of the conscious and unconscious states of the human mind, an argument emphasized by Jung in his *Answer to Job*.⁴ It has, notwithstanding the antinomy itself, an underlying diabolism: so far as both God and Satan (whispering inside the ears of an asleep Eve in the Garden of Eden) seek ideological hegemony over the unconscious of Man, and remain blissfully unaware of the consequences of their wrath upon man for their own inarticulate, self-serving domain, they are uncannily similar, if not Freudian. The shadow “grows”, because God injects the irrational/universal when Man is most vulnerable, and also because inarticulative influx forces man into the submission of his rational power (if that is power, at all, in this current context) without knowing how to negotiate on human terms, resulting in the apocalyptic aftermath, portrayed best by Job when he mourns his loss, but cannot stop the shadow from amplifying exponentially, leading to an affect which attempts to introject His anger and reverse the consequences of irrationality upon God, in a bid to humanize him and enforce a dialectic, a heroic attempt for which Job has been credited with the nomenclature of the Sublime⁵:

What you know, I also know;
I am not inferior to you.
But I desire to speak to the Almighty
And to argue my case with God.

(13:2-3, p. 44)

I revert back to Ezekiel’s poem when the league “were twice attacked, and lost our way. / A section claimed its liberty/To leave the group. I tried to pray” (17-19). To what extent is the metaphor of attack a divine influx? The confrontation with the “desert patch” is replicated by the poet for communicating that the shadow continues to grow, as represented by the increasing attacks. Job uses the metaphor of God’s terror in 3:23-3:26 by invoking the affect in divinity-induced suffering, reproduced by Ezekiel in his repetition of “lost”, holding the divine agency responsible/culpable. What is common to both is this desire for discourse with the Almighty; while Job pits desire and speech as negotiable tools in his discourse with power, Ezekiel utilizes traditional means, such as praying, probably seeking a cessation of, or at least a justification for these terrors.⁶ Job’s accusation, and his need to disempower God by employing Satanic apparatus, etymologically speaking (adversary), is subtly replicated by Ezekiel’s use of the word “try”; the false consciousness of power could create a psychological barrier with its ideal form, and attenuate the worst inflictions of divine wrath. The articulation of objective loss (and its companionate grief), I hypothesize, could have been inserted by Ezekiel from Herman Hesse’s *Journey to the East*, first published as *Die Morgenlandfahrt* in 1932, followed by an English translation in 1956 – a text with which the poet might have been familiar.⁷ Notwithstanding this standalone resemblance, the shadow, I conclude, grows in Ezekiel because it grew in the Book of Job; it grows, because God remains blissfully ignorant of his apocalyptic aftermath, or fractionally aware of it – not enough to relinquish His power or invert the hegemonic pyramid in both texts.

One last argument requires to be made with reference to Ezekiel’s “Enterprise”; as the poem approaches its end, the reconciliation initiated from the poet’s side (One cannot argue the same for God) sounds defeatist, and one final submission to the failed dialectic initiated earlier:

When finally we reached the place
 We hardly knew why we were there,
 The trip had darkened every face,
 Our deeds were neither great nor rare.
Home is the place to gather g r a c e.

(26–30, both forms of emphasis mine)

K.D. Verma has elaborated upon the final line in this stanza, claiming that “true grace lies in the identity of the self with the object-world” (156). But this is partially true; the identity of the self is obscured by Ezekiel’s reference to the metaphysics behind the lack of euphoria upon arrival – the “why” in the second line introduces, albeit stealthily, the “where” in his disapproval. The consequence of this is, the “self”, and its “identity” had been lost somewhere, and somehow along the way; hence, the speculative metaphysics acted upon by the poet. Worsening this is the compensation for the factual loss of grace – the “darkened” face becomes symbolic of the loss of the Universal, and the devaluation of the objective itself (“our deeds were neither great nor rare”), the incantation of which in the final line is a reminder of its absence, or the metaphysical possibility of its presence. The instructive element in these abovementioned lines does not go untraced either, as Amit Chaudhuri remarks how his [Ezekiel’s] later poems might be construed as “a description of an unlearning which is also a form of learning, a relentless attempt to rectify wrongs – for the discipline of the poet of the minor literature” (219–20). This is, also, a useful half-truth, for “unlearning” does not lead towards an enlightened poet, but the theorization of an ideal that stands *despite* the poem. Ezekiel’s objective is to draw the demoralized community into a human whole, jettisoning them from the unaccomplishable, theological ideal – unaccomplishable in factual terms, but certainly an ideological reality, so long as the “pilgrimage” is never initiated again. Grace is rendered religious, in its original, etymological sense;⁸ “place”, in the more private sense, is symbolic of the (community of the) individual who aspires for the conscious, dialectic synthesis between the Supreme Unconscious, whose bounty becomes “grace”, and “home”, the communitarian unconscious which aspires, like Job, to remain in a fragile, habitable zone, away from all apocalyptic aftermaths of Yahweh. The unbridgeable gap between these two theoretical extremes is recognized by Job’s friend, Zophar, leading Job to individuate towards the culmination of the Book:

Can you fathom the mysteries of God?
 Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?

(11:7, p. 37)

Both rhetorical questions must be treated dialectically; the mysteries of God are unearthed by Job when confronted by Yahweh towards the final section of the Book, but the objective behind fathoming its mysteries is apparent, since Job expects to be compensated for his physical loss and retain reverence for the Almighty at the same time (the loss of his body, home, etc.), not inherit His power. Similarly, probing the limits of the Almighty introjects the Godly by donning his demeanour, but its purpose, once again, is the restoration of moderation from excruciating, human limits where life becomes unsustainable. In other words, individuation is the viable solution for the antinomy between God’s light and God’s shadow, where Man’s *agon* finds meaning, a mediation which, although fragile, has both religious and human connotations, and substitutes the naïve “good of God” for the mature “agon of the Go(o)d”, as Jung asserts in “Conscious, Unconscious, and Individuation” and “A Study in the Process of Individuation”.⁹ To what extent is this intertextual reading applicable to Ezekiel’s poem?

Conclusion

It would be dishonest to claim that individuation had escaped the eyes of the critics of “Enterprise”;¹⁰ the protagonist of the poem, like H.H. in Herman Hesse’s novella, realizes that accusation

would not resolve the catastrophe of the apocalyptic, whereas a careful re-assessment of the league’s original ideal would probably bear fruit.¹¹ Therefore, like Job, he does not “fathom the mysteries of God,” or “probe the limits of the Almighty”; he forces God to restore His grace, and evolves into a Jungian, “indestructible whole”, where instead of settling for an elusive, dialectic synthesis, he opts for a dialectic framework by transcending it, giving an impression of the antinomian sublime. This then, is the Jungian “Enterprise” of the poem: “Home is the place to gather grace” must be interpreted as a dynamic coalition of the Sublime conscious, Communitarian unconscious and the Supreme Unconscious whose transient dialectic is transcended for an epiphanic revelation that does not submit to either human or divine excesses, which are limitations, theoretically speaking. It individuates in an effort to struggle heroically towards moral superiority, and restore spiritual consciousness from an otherwise inflammatory God who had “darkened every face”. In doing this, Ezekiel is unconsciously indebted to the Book of Job, and he introjects Job’s discursive masculinity and his eventual victory within the ideological framework of his poem, as I have analysed in this paper.

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Notes

- ¹ “Ezekiel himself acknowledged [that] “I am not religious or even a moral persona in any conventional sense. Yet, I’ve always felt myself to be religious and moral in some sense. The gap between these two statements is the essential sphere of my poetry”” (85). See Makarand Paranjape’s “A Poetry of Proportions: Nissim Ezekiel’s Quest for the Exact Name”, published in *South Asian Review*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2005, pp. 79–95. *T & F Online*, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2005.11932402>. Accessed 7 November, 2022.
- ² “Even then you frighten me in dreams/and terrify me with visions, /so that I prefer strangling and death, rather than this body of mine” (NIV, p. 25).
- ³ “But what does man possess that God does not have? Because of his littleness, puniness, and defencelessness against the Almighty... God has no need of this circumspection, for nowhere does he come up against an insuperable obstacle that would force him to hesitate and hence make him reflect on himself” (R.F.C. Hull tr., 597)
- ⁴ “He [Job] clearly sees that God is at odds with himself – so totally at odds that he, Job, is quite certain of finding in God a helper and an “advocate” against God... Yahweh is not split but is an *antinomy* – a totality of inner opposites – and this is the indispensable condition for his tremendous dynamism, his omniscience and omnipotence” (Hull tr., 567)
- ⁵ What Job wills, in essence, is the enforcement of a “possible internal fracturing” (163) against God, which would destabilize theodicy, leading to the moderation of divine power and raise Man to the magnitude of the Kantian sublime, denotative of moral superiority. See “The Voice from the Whirlwind”: The Tragic Sublime and the Limits of Dialogue” by Carol A. Newsom, published in *Defenses of Clay: The Book of Job*, edited by Hannah and Elizabeth Varkey. Citations at the end of the essay.
- ⁶ “From the mid-sixties onwards he has been creating a spiritual and psychic ‘room’ of his own which may either provide access to nothing or serve as a doorway to the infinite enigmas of self and place” (100–101). The “Enterprise” becomes a befitting beginning to this phase. See James Wieland’s “Making light of the process: Nissim Ezekiel’s poetic fictions”, published in *Kunapipi*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, 1980, pp. 91–103. *Research Online*, <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol2/iss2/13>. Accessed 8 Nov, 2022.
- ⁷ The protagonist of the novella, H.H., who is also a participant in that “great enterprise” (42), realizes, after the loss of their servant Leo, that “this was the beginning of trouble, the first indication of a storm which would break over us... but it seemed that the more certain his loss became, the more indispensable he seemed” (32). The edition in question is the 1998 reprint of its translation from the original German, published by Book Faith India.

- ⁸ “God’s unmerited favour, or help” (n.p.). See this link: https://www.etymonline.com/word/grace#etymonline_v_41183
- ⁹ “The way human life should be... is the old game of hammer and anvil: between them the patient iron is forged into an indestructible whole, an “individual” ...it is not the empirical man that forms the “correspondentia” to the world, as the medievalists thought, but rather the indescribable reality of the psychic or spiritual man, who cannot be described because he is compounded of consciousness as well as of the indeterminable extent of the unconscious” (288, 308). Citations at the end of the essay.
- ¹⁰ As Norman Ross Edgington correctly averred, “The process of individuation can be successful only through integrating the physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and psychological aspects of existence” (142). See “Nissim Ezekiel’s Vision of Life and Death”, published in the *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1987, pp. 139–145. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40872969>. Accessed 6 Nov, 2022.
- ¹¹ H.H. must also seek the grace of Leo towards the end; as I have hypothesized that Ezekiel was inspired by the events of the novella, it is important to note how Leo transforms into a modern-day Yahweh, where he punishes the protagonist, for he seems to “have slighted religion” and “it only needed our reminder to awaken the defendant’s conscience and make him a repentant self-accuser” (81). He individuates, by initiating a dialectic between Leo the servant and Leo the supreme unconscious, before the author hints at his death upon revelation.

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“Number one for ever”: Benthamite Utilitarianism, *Oliver Twist* and the Doctrine of Methodological Individualism

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Abstract: Charles Dickens often satirised and sharply criticised the unfortunate social realities of nineteenth-century England through his works such as *Oliver Twist* (1838), *David Copperfield* (1850), *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and *Hard Times* (1854). In my paper, I will be putting forward the argument that Dickens’s novels advocate for social change by exemplifying the theoretical doctrine of methodological individualism. As a social science doctrine, methodological individualism was first introduced by Max Weber in his work *Economy and Society* (1922). The central precept of Methodological Individualism, according to Weber, is that individual actions and motivations rather than social and cultural realities should be considered as the chief drivers of social change. However, it should be precisely noted that methodological individualism as a doctrine is not a reckless celebration of individualism, but, more importantly, a careful analysis of how the intentional states of individuals contribute to the unfolding of social changes in a given society. In other words, the doctrine of Methodological Individualism proposes that social structures are influential but they are not superstructures whose influence exceeds the agency of individual members of a society. In order to illustrate the argument, I will be specifically focusing on the novel *Oliver Twist*. The historical and social context of the novel consists of 1834 Poor Law Reforms and widespread economic and social inequalities in nineteenth century England. Within these contexts the characters of Fagin, Mr Bumble, Nancy, Harry Maylie and Mr Brownlow make highly individualistic choices that shape the narrative of the novel, challenge the established code of social relations and finally restores Oliver Twist to his rightful place in the society of nineteenth century England.

Keywords: Methodological Individualism, *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens, 1834 Poor Law Reforms, *Laissez-faire*, Benthamite Utilitarianism

Introduction

In a crucial scene in *Oliver Twist* (1838), the criminal genius Fagin attempts to train his new recruit Noah Claypole alias Mr Bolter. Fagin tells him that contrary to the opinions of certain conjurers, it is number one that is the most important number and not number three. Mr Bolter, who was endowed with the quality of selfishness in generous measures happily assents and states “Number one for ever”. However, Fagin makes it clear to Claypole that what he intended as number one is not the isolationist selfishness central to Claypole’s character but a kind of pragmatic self-centered behavior that realizes that if one member in a criminal gang wishes to avoid the gallows, he or she should look after the welfare of everyone else in the criminal gang (Dickens 320). During his conversation with Noah, Fagin demonstrates an unparalleled knowledge of the workings of criminal gangs where stringent loyalty towards each other is the first and foremost rule. In his speech, Fagin persuasively argues that within his tightly knit criminal gang, the interest of one is the interest of everyone. Each

member of his gang depends upon everyone else in order not only to ensure their livelihood but also to keep themselves safely away from the gallows. Fagin's portrayal of the criminal gangs in nineteenth century England is aligned with the core principle of Methodological Individualism which is that individual actions form the chief cause of social structures, movements and social changes. According to Fagin, it takes only one member to cause the destruction of his whole criminal gang and his criminal gang is not a superstructure that can exist beyond the actions of its individual members.

Fagin's familiar instructions to Noah Claypole on the true identity of "number one" rests on Hobbesian assumptions about human nature extensively employed in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, where the entire economic system depends on the unfettered exercise of self-interest, interpreted as a psychological as well as an economic law. As an extension of this assumption, Benthamite utilitarians insisted that a rational calculation of self-interest could be made; Noah, disguised as Morris Bolter, finds Fagin's careful logic wholly persuasive. (Patten 211)

The Doctrine of Methodological Individualism

Methodological Individualism is a social science doctrine advocated by the Austrian-born British philosopher Karl Popper. According to Methodological Individualism, social processes and historical changes should be primarily explained or stated in terms of the beliefs, desires, and actions of particular individuals. Methodological Individualism precludes explanations that appeal to social factors that cannot, in turn, be individualistically explained. Through this paper, I will be attempting to analyze the major characters in this novel in the light of methodological individualism while firmly placing this novel within the historical context of nineteenth century England.

According to the Israeli academic Joseph Agassi, Institutionalistic Individualism (another term for Methodological Individualism used by Agassi) is the significant contribution of Karl Popper to Social Sciences, and this doctrine is aptly suited for describing social changes and institutional reforms within a society. According to Agassi, Holism and Psychologistic Individualism were the traditional modes of analysis regarding the relationship between society and its constituent individuals. In order to define Methodological Individualism, it is, therefore, necessary to define Holism and Psychologistic Individualism and elaborate on how Methodological Individualism differs from both. According to the Holistic view, a society exists above and beyond the actions and desires of its constituent individuals. Therefore according to Holism, a society is super-individual. According to Agassi, this viewpoint has a metaphysical aspect that limits its effectiveness and goes against the practical realities of individual actions and social change. On the other hand, according to Psychologistic Individualism, society is the sum total or even by-product of the actions of various individuals. The problem with this viewpoint is that it ignores how individual actions and desires themselves are shaped by various social rules, regulations, or even the presence of various social organizations (Agassi 244).

Agassi argues that traditionally the conflict between proponents of Holism and Psychologistic Individualism hinders on the unspoken but tacitly agreed upon premise that 'wholes (such as society) if they exist has aims and interests that can be separate from the aims and interests of its citizens (Agassi 245). This premise, according to Agassi, constitutes the metaphysical aspect of Holism. Whereas according to the proponents of Psychologistic Individualism, there is no society as such but only a collection of individuals (Agassi 245). So, any claims about society are mere shorthand assertions about groups of individuals. Psychologistic Individualism, therefore, denies the very existence of 'wholes' as a distinct category. According to Agassi, Methodological Individualism here offers a necessary corrective to the discussion on society and individuals. According to Methodological Individualism propounded by Popper, 'wholes' do exist, but they do not have distinct aims and interests that are separate from the aims and interests of its citizens. A society or an institution can have an aim only when people give it an aim or act according to what they consider as its interests. As Bertrand Russell said, "institutions mould character and character transforms institutions. Reform in both must march hand in hand" (qtd in Agassi 267).

It is important to mention that the term 'Methodological Individualism' is sometimes used ambiguously in social sciences. Academics such as Kenneth J Arrow and Geoff Hodgson, in their respective scholarly articles titled "Methodological Individualism and Social Knowledge" and "Behind Methodological Individualism," considers Methodological Individualism as a form of knowledge that completely ignores the influence of social institutions. However, according to Agassi, such a way of looking at human actions is Psychologistic Individualism, and it should be necessarily separated from the 'Methodological Individualism' of Karl Popper. In his scholarly article titled "The Case for Methodological Individualism," Jon Elster effectively illustrates the doctrine as defined by Karl Popper and Joseph Agassi.

This issue is related to the conflict over methodological Individualism, rejected by many Marxists who wrongly link it with Individualism in the ethical or political sense. By methodological Individualism, I mean the doctrine that all social phenomena (their structure and their change) are, in principle, explicable only in terms of individuals – their properties, goals, and beliefs. This doctrine is not incompatible with any of the following true statements. (a) Individuals often have goals that involve the welfare of other individuals. (b) They often have beliefs about supra-individual entities that are not reducible to beliefs about individuals. "The capitalists fear the working class" cannot be reduced to the feelings of capitalists concerning individual workers. By contrast, "The capitalists' profit is threatened by the working class" can be reduced to a complex statement about the consequences of the actions taken by individual workers.¹ (c) Many properties of individuals, such as "powerful," are irreducibly relational, so that accurate description of one individual may require reference to other individuals. (Elster 453)

Socio-Historical Context and Situational Logic in *Oliver Twist*

As the academic and scholar Susan Zlotnick mentions in her Research Paper titled "The Law's a Bachelor": "Oliver Twist," Bastardy, and the New Poor Law," the social world of the novel is founded on the workhouse system of the nineteenth century England and the infamous 1834 poor law reforms. The 1834 poor law reforms stipulated that life in workhouses of England should be made "less eligible" than life outside it. These poor law reforms were founded on the doctrine of Malthusian economics that, feared an explosion in the population of poor people in England. The chief tenet of the infamous poor law reforms was that life in the workhouses should be 'less eligible' than life outside of it (Zlotnick 131).

With reference to the narrative of *Oliver Twist*, one particular change caused by 1834 new poor laws assumes special significance. According to the older poor laws in England, an unwed and impoverished mother of an illegitimate child could point out the father of the child to Parish authorities, who in turn could sue the father for child support. The new poor laws of 1834, fearing a population explosion of illegitimate children, shifted the responsibility of illegitimate children to the unwed mother alone. The critics of the 1834 poor laws sarcastically described these laws as the 'philanderer's charter' as the laws absolved men of all responsibility and placed the whole burden on the mothers of illegitimate children (Zlotnick 131). *Oliver Twist* offers a direct criticism of the 1834 poor laws as the narrative in the novel portrays Oliver's mother, Agnes Fleming, as an innocent maiden seduced by an upper-class libertine named Edward. The entire narrative in the novel is about the search for Oliver's parentage and restoring his patrimony and rightful place in the English society of the nineteenth century.

The social and economic context of *Oliver Twist* lends itself to an effective analysis of this novel within the framework of Methodological individualism. The 1834 poor laws and the economic inequalities in nineteenth-century England act as the social institutions that influence the individual characters in Dickens's novel. As Joseph Agassi argues, Methodological Individualism differentiates itself from Psychologistic Individualism by acknowledging the influence of social structures on members of society while asserting that these same social structures are not super-individual. Hence within the context of this novel, the unfair social situations of nineteenth-century England are

acknowledged as potent influences on the characters of this novel, but these same social structures are not portrayed as immutable and unchangeable superstructures beyond the influence of individual members of the society.

According to Agassi, the behavior of individuals in accordance with the influence of social structures or institutions can be described as 'situational logic' (Agassi 264). Situational logic transcends the limitations of Methodological Holism and Psychologistic Individualism by recognizing that the very existence of specific social structures influences individuals to mould their behaviors accordingly. Agassi argues that situational logic was employed by all serious social thinkers long before Karl Popper. Karl Popper's importance is that he was the first one to formulate the principle clearly and bring it into academic parlance (Agassi 264).

I shall repeat that institutions can be explained as inter-personal means of co-ordination, as attitudes which are accepted conventionally or by agreement. Not that an agreement was signed by those who have the attitude, but the attitude is maintained by one largely because it is maintained by many, and yet everyone is always at liberty to reconsider his attitude and change it. This idea leaves room for the rational principle of institutional reform. It accords with the classical individualistic idea that social phenomena are but the interactions between individuals. Yet it does not accord with the classical individualistic-psychologistic idea that this interaction depends on individuals' aims and material circumstances alone; rather it adds to these factors of interaction the existing inter-personal means of co-ordination as well as individuals' ability to use, reform, or abolish them, on their own decision and responsibility. (Agassi 267)

Through his novel, Charles Dickens presents the workhouse system in nineteenth-century England as an example of stringent utilitarianism devoid of humanitarian concerns. As Robert L Patten notes in his seminal essay titled "Capitalism and Compassion in *Oliver Twist*," the eponymous character is considered by the workhouse administrators and parish authorities merely as a means to an end, the end being their personal benefit.

Everyone who wants Oliver wants him for their own personal gain and not for his sake. To the parish surgeon, who attends by contract, Oliver's birth is the occasion for a fee. To Mrs. Mann, Oliver, as long as he remains alive, is a source of income. To the beadle, he is an object on which to exercise "parochial" authority, as well as Bumble's invention in names. To the Board of Guardians, he is a responsibility to be educated and taught a useful trade, such as oakum picking. All their collective efforts are towards getting their charges employed or otherwise off the parish rolls; to this end, Bumble even transports dying paupers to other parishes, to save the funeral expenses. (Patten 208)

All the characters in *Oliver Twist* ranging from the Jewish criminal overlord Fagin and murderous Bill Sikes to the angelic Rose Maylie and the benevolent patriarch Mr. Brownlow, function within the social world of nineteenth-century England that was defined by extreme income inequalities and an inhuman workhouse system for the poor that in turn enabled robbery and crime in the lower classes and corruption in the higher classes of the society. The characters in *Oliver Twist* make their choices and frame their identities within this social order. However, their unique personality traits drive this novel's plot forward and make it one of the classics of nineteenth-century English literature. Here lies the 'situational logic' in *Oliver Twist*.

When it comes to the individuality of characters that determine the plot of this novel, Mr. Bumble, the former Beadle and later Master of the workhouse, and the elderly gentleman Mr. Brownlow offer a notable contrast. On outward appearance, both individuals are respected members of English society, far removed from the criminal underbelly of nineteenth-century England populated by the likes of Fagin and Bill Sikes. Both are in a position to extend guidance and compassion toward the unfortunate members of society. Mr. Bumble in his capacity as Beadle and Mr. Brownlow in his capacity as a wealthy and affluent member of English society.

However, what distinguishes both of these characters is their mental makeup and the choices they make in life. The corruption, greed, and fake piety of Mr. Bumble played a significant role in the

sufferings of Oliver Twist at the workhouse. Later, Mr. Bumble furthered the damage by poisoning the ears of Mr. Brownlow by describing Oliver as an ungrateful, villainous child. Dickens uses the term ‘philosopher’ to refer to characters such as Mr Bumble. For Dickens, the term philosopher does not refer to a wise and reasonable man or woman but to a coldly calculative individual whose personal morality is devious and whose motives are purely based on personal gain. Dickens portrays the characters of Mr. Bumble, Mrs. Mann, and the members of the Poor Law Board as representatives of the laissez-faire economic system as well as the Benthamite and Malthusian capitalistic principles (Patten 210). However, through his skill in characterization, Dickens elevates Mr. Bumble from merely being the caricature of a heartless bureaucrat to a character who, despite all his severe deficiencies in moral character, is still human. At the end of the novel, in response to the pronouncement of Mr. Brownlow that English law considers the husband to be responsible for the actions of the wife, Mr. Bumble, with reference to his own marital life, sarcastically remarks that “Law must be a Bachelor” (Zlotnick 131).

Mr. Brownlow’s role in this novel’s plot is starkly different. His belief in the inherent goodness of Oliver is rewarded at the end of the novel, and he plays a significant role in the final redemption of Oliver Twist. If Mr. Bumble exhibits the traits of apathy towards human suffering and greed for personal gain, Mr. Brownlow is the kind old man who harbors a belief in inherent human goodness despite certain incidents in his own life that betrayed his trust in the goodness of human character. If the apathy of Mr. Bumble is founded in the cold, calculative reasoning of utilitarian philosophy, the kindness of Mr. Brownlow is rooted in a natural instinct of compassion which Dickens considered to be the second nature of human beings (Patten 209). The fate of Mr. Brownlow and Mr. Bumble at the end of the novel, as portrayed by Dickens, is also indicative of the destiny marked for them as a result of their mental makeup and the choices they made in life. Mr. Bumble ends up as a mere inmate at the workhouse he once commanded, and Mr. Brownlow gains an obedient and eager pupil and adopted son in the form of Oliver Twist (Dickens 401).

Fagin is the most colorful character in this novel and someone whose actions and choices shape the novel’s plot more than any other character. Fagin is simultaneously a victim of the social order of nineteenth-century England as well as a God-like figure who exerts unparalleled influence and control over the criminal gang, of which he is a leader and mentor. Even in his seemingly cowardly and submissive behavior towards the fellow criminal Bill Sikes, he retains calmness, self-composure, and cold-blooded calculative nature. Traits that are alien to the hot-headed and violent Bill Sikes. There is a particular scene in this novel where after an unpleasant conversation with Bill Sikes, Fagin calmly thinks about stroking the embers of hatred in the mind of Nancy against Sikes, leading her to poison Bill Sikes physically. Through this, Fagin hopes to achieve two objectives. To get rid of the abusive, violent, and unreliable Bill Sikes forever and to doubly strengthen the loyalty of Nancy towards him (Dickens 333).

Many academic papers have already been written on elements of antisemitism and stereotyping inherent in the character of Fagin, whom the novelist portrays as a wily and miserly Jew. Susan Meyer notes in her scholarly essay titled “Antisemitism and Social Critique in Dickens’s “*Oliver Twist*.” Victorian Literature and Culture “ that Dickens was aware of the charges of antisemitism against his work and made efforts to lessen the antisemitism in his works. In the 1867 edition of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens substituted the name Fagin instead of referring to the villain as ‘Jew’ as occurred in the earlier drafts of the novel. Dickens also introduced the character of a kindly Jew, Riah, in his novel *Our Mutual Friend*, published in 1864 (Meyer 240).

Even though, on a surface level, Fagin’s criminal gang and the lives of respected members of society, such as Mr. Bumble, are diametrically opposed to each other, their outlook on life is remarkably similar. An unfettered exercise of self-interest coupled with an utter lack of natural human compassion characterizes the lives of both Fagin and Mr. Bumble. Just as Mr. Bumble and the members of the Poor Law Board try to impress upon poor Oliver regarding their essential good

nature in raising Oliver, Fagin later tries to impress upon Oliver that if it was not for his help, Oliver would have died of hunger in the streets. According to Charles Dickens, the philosophy of *Laissez Faire* economics and Benthamite Utilitarianism persuasively influenced criminals such as Fagin and Bill Sikes as well as someone like Mr. Bumble. The characteristic trait of unfettered self-interest also comes within the territory of Methodological Individualism. Within the narrative world of this novel, the selfishness of Mr. Bumble and Fagin played an important role in creating the inhuman conditions in the workhouse and also in forming the tightly knit criminal gang of Fagin and Bill Sikes. If Mr Bumble and Mr Brownlow differed in their character despite similarity in their social status, Fagin and Mr Bumble share the similar characteristic traits of cunning and hypocrisy despite diametrically opposite social status of the two characters

However, despite his cold and calculative nature or because of that, Fagin has a strange charisma and pervasive influence over his pupils, such as Charley Bates and the Artful Dodger, and also over Bill Sikes, even though the latter often pretends to be under no one's influence. After Fagin recaptured Oliver while the latter had gone out on an errand to deliver some books for Mr. Brownlow, Dodger explained to Oliver that he and Charley Bates deserted Oliver in their first expedition together as a result of consideration for Mr. Fagin as police knew that Dodger and Charley worked for Fagin. However, despite all the villainy of Fagin, it was at his residence that Oliver truly felt welcome in his life for the first time. The essential individuality and idiosyncrasy of Fagin and his criminal gang are also closely co-related to the slang they use in their everyday communication. The famous reviewer Richard Ford who critiqued Dickens's novel in *Quarterly Review* in 1839, however, marveled at the author's ability to write a believable criminal speech for characters like Fagin, who represented the criminal underbelly of London (Michael 41).

If Mr. Bumble and Mr. Brownlow were two individuals of similar social status having different mental makeups leading to different destinies, Rose Maylie and Nancy were two women of wildly different social status united by their common desire to lead Oliver to a good life. Rose Maylie was the adopted daughter of Mrs. Maylie (and sister of Oliver's mother, as revealed at the end of the novel), and she had always lived an affluent life under the loving care of Mrs. Maylie.

Rose Maylie and Mrs. Maylie play a pivotal role in this novel by lovingly caring for Oliver after he lands wounded at their doorstep after a robbery enterprise under the leadership of Bill Sikes. Later they, along with Mr. Brownlow, help establish Oliver Twist's identity and punish those who wronged him earlier. Nancy, by contrast, was a member of the criminal gang of Fagin and she was instrumental in capturing Oliver when he was out on an errand for Mr. Brownlow and later delivering Oliver up to Fagin. However, the sufferings of Oliver under Fagin change her mind, and she disregarding the danger to her own life, tells about the plot of Monks (half-brother of Oliver) and Fagin to trap Oliver forever in a life of crime to Rose Maylie and Mr Brownlow. This results in Fagin getting convicted by the court and finally receiving the death sentence for his life of crime. The death of Fagin consequently leads to the dismantlement of his entire criminal gang. Thus the titular character of this novel transforms from a poor orphan boy to an allegorical figure who exposes the corruption of Mr Bumble and destroys the criminal empire of Fagin (Lankford 20).

In contrast to the other characters in this novel, it is indeed difficult to discern the 'situational logic' in the actions of Oliver Twist as he remains morally pure even under the most trying circumstances. The distinguished Milton Scholar Edward Le Comte describes the character of Oliver Twist as someone who cannot be polluted by the moral and physical filth surrounding his existence.. His character neither has the worldly experience of someone like Mr. Losborne, the cunning of someone like Fagin, or the shades of grey of a character like Nancy. However, unlike the opinion of certain critics, his evident piety and faith in God is not an unexplainable phenomenon but can be attributed to the prayers that were forced upon him during his childhood in the workhouse. Hence, Oliver, as a character, indeed gets shaped by his experiences and the influence of society. For example, Oliver, who had only experienced workhouse administrators' inhuman and coldly calculative behavior, is

startled when he hears the board of Governors speak to him (Patten 208). Dickens also portrays through the novel that the child Oliver is more aware of the dark underbelly of London society than Mr. Brownlow, a kind and elderly character in this novel. However, Oliver does not play an active role in influencing the society around him or driving the plot of this novel forward other than in his capacity as a symbol of innocence that prompts others to take action. Similarly, Monks, the half-brother of Oliver Twist, is a character that is merely a personification of intense self-absorption, cold and calculative vengeance, as well as a kind of toxic Epicureanism. Even more, than all the other characters, it is Harry Maylie who best exemplifies the power of individual actions and choices to challenge social customs, and therefore he best exemplifies the doctrine of Methodological Individualism in this novel.

Harry Maylie is the son of Mrs. Maylie and, by birth, belonged to the upper echelons of English society during the nineteenth century. As a result of his birth and personal talents, a glorious career in National politics awaited him, and many of his relatives were waiting for him to take up his spot in the National politics of England. However, Harry found to his dismay that the glorious career that awaited him also hindered his long-cherished love for Rose Maylie. Rose feared that the dishonor of her birth would stain his status and make her an object of scorn among his illustrious friends in the metropolis. Mrs. Maylie also acknowledges that Rose's fears are genuine, and the alliance between Harry and Rose is problematic due to the pervasive influence of social prejudices in nineteenth-century England. After long deliberation, Harry Maylie renounced his worldly aspirations and took up the post of a humble pastor in a village church so that he could banish all the fears from the mind of Rose and his mother and ask for Rose's hand in marriage once again. Harry Maylie tells Rose that by taking up the position of the pastor of a rural church, he had essentially negated all the impediments in the form of future power and prestige that stood in the way of his marriage to Rose (Dickens 390). The novel ends with the marriage of Harry and Rose and Oliver getting adopted by Mr. Brownlow.

Conclusion

Through my paper, I have demonstrated that many of the characters in *Oliver Twist* have a distinct individuality shaped by their societal factors but never entirely constrained by them. The societal factors that motivate them are the direct influence of Malthusian and Benthamite capitalistic/utilitarian principles in the case of characters such as Mr. Bumble, Mrs. Mann, and the members of the Poor Law Board, the indirect repercussions of the Malthusian and Benthamite system in the case of characters such as Fagin and Bill Sikes as well as the influence of the doctrine of humanitarianism and idealism of Charles Dickens as exemplified in the characters of Mr. Brownlow, Mrs. Maylie, Rose Maylie, and Harry Maylie. This demonstrates the 'situational logic' of these characters. It is precisely the 'situational logic' of these characters, which in turn illustrates the doctrine of Methodological Individualism, that drives the plot of this novel. Similar to his other great works such as *Great Expectations* (1860), *A Christmas Carol* (1843), and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), the strength of *Oliver Twist* lies in its acknowledgment of social structures and prejudices as potent influences on a person's character and fate but never treating these social structures or prejudices as insurmountable obstacles. That is essentially the core principle of Methodological Individualism as well.

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Examining Leo Tolstoy's Character Anna Karenina through the Lens of Erich Neumann's Thoughts on the Medusa Myth¹

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Abstract: If anyone says that the character of Anna in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is a strong and powerful woman then it is labelled as a rather banal and commonplace observation. I argue, however, that such a statement fails to appreciate the depth of Anna's power. This article applies the mythology and symbology of the Medusa to Anna which will allow the reader to better understand Anna's moral and feminine strength. To do this, I will examine the Medusa myth through a framework provided by Erich Neumann. This framework will allow me to advance the argument that Anna's femininity is a creative and transformative power. Anna is not simply powerful but as powerful as an Infernal Goddess like Medusa who challenges relationships, institutions, and morality itself.

Keywords: Medusa, Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, femininity, Erich Neumann, Jungian philosophy

Introduction

The Medusa myth has petrified and intrigued readers, listeners, and cinematic viewers throughout history. Classical Greek and Roman writers² have contributed to this mythology as well as artists³, poets⁴, feminist thinkers⁵, psychologists⁶, lawyers⁷, and clothing designers⁸. According to Marjorie Garber and Nancy Vickers, Medusa is "at once Monster and beauty, disease and cure, threat and protection, poison and remedy, the woman with snaky locks who could turn the unwary onlooker to stone has come to stand for all that is obdurate and irresistible" (Garber and Vickers, 2003, p. 1). This sense of daulity is a key reason for the myth's durability. Garber and Vickers continue to state that Medusa is a powerful feminine figure who is "elusive, elliptical, [and] unable to be subdued" whilst being 'the all-too-perfect emblem of what is wrong with powerful women' (Garber and Vickers, 2003, p. 3).

This article will use the Medusa myth as a lens to explore the character of Anna in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. My aim is to demonstrate that the myth allows the reader to better understand Anna's moral and feminine strength. Anna's moral value is seen in her transformative capabilities. Anna can morally transform certain characters, such as Levin, and some actions, such as suicide. Ultimately, this article argues that the literary character of Anna Karenina should be categorized, alongside Medusa, as a powerful and 'Infernal' Feminine Goddess figure.

To argue that Anna, akin to Medusa, is a powerful and Infernal Feminine Goddess, this article will utilize Amy Mandelker's analysis of Tolstoy's use of literary framing techniques. Justin Weir notes that for Mandelker, literary framing techniques "mediate the way we view Tolstoy's most famous heroine" (Weir, 2011, p. 26). Mandelker writes:

By creating a series of framed portraits of Anna – texts within text – [Tolstoy] repeatedly arrests his narrative flow in order to frame his heroine and alter the reader to the existence of the frame of beauty, corporeality, and the marketplace of both, that confines her. (Mandelker in Weir, 2011, p. 144).

This article will explore two literary framing techniques which are identified by Mandelker. First, there is Mikhaylov's portrait of Anna within the novel. Mikhaylov's portrait is an integral literary frame technique that facilitates Levin's moral transformation. Second, Anna's body after her suicide is framed to turn her into a self-portrait. This article, however, will extend on these literary framing techniques to argue that Anna is not just a powerful woman. Rather, Anna is a powerful, and powerless, Infernal Feminine Goddess, like Medusa, who challenges men, women, Society, and morality.

In the scholarship surrounding the cinematic representation of the novel, we can see references to the Medusa myth. For example, Emily Pierce focuses on the representation of the female characters in Joe Wright's 2012 cinematic portrayal of *Anna Karenina*. Pierce references the scene in which Anna's hair is "spread out like Medusa on her pillow" where she is 'dying' after the birth of her daughter (Pierce, 2014, p. 21). Pierce notes that within these scenes, Karenin, the husband, and Vronsky, the lover, are with Anna. The 'dying' Anna with her Medusa hair is powerful enough to reconcile both Karenin and Vronsky. Furthermore, for Monika Pietrzak-Franger, the cinematic scene of Anna's "illness after the birth of her daughter ... carries clear intertextual references" (Pietrzak-Franger in Hassler-Forest and Nicklas 2015, p. 250) to Caravaggio's painting of Medusa's decapitated head. Pietrzak-Franger continues: "Psychanalytically, she is here allied with the fear of castration; from the feminist perspective, this Medusa suggests Karenina's rage" (Pietrzak-Franger in Hassler-Forest and Nicklas 2015, p. 250).

Although these are scholarly examinations of a cinematic portrayal of the novel, the theoretical framework of applying the Medusa myth to the literary character of Anna exists. For example, Dragan Kujundžić writes: "Levin's words also betray a fear of his own castration, a 'horror,' 'a Medusa like effect' ... when facing feminine sexuality" (Kujundžić, 1993, p. 74). In addition, R. P. Blackmur invokes the Medusa myth when analyzing the scene where Levin meets Anna. Blackmur writes that when Levin "sees her face as stone and more beautiful than ever, the very Medusa-face of life ... for a moment he succumbs" (Blackmur, 1950, p. 453). For Blackmur, Levin's succumbing to Anna's powerful feminine sexuality is connected to seeing "death as a raw force, a concrete, focal, particular epiphany of the raw force of death" (Blackmur, 1950, p. 453). Blackmur continues and holds that when Levin sees Anna's face and encounters her beauty, his steadfast moral principles mingles with her erotic temptation. Set against "the strange intimate noise which Shakespeare calls the endless jar of right and wrong in which justice resides" (Blackmur, 1950, p. 453), Anna's face becomes the Medusa-face that is stone and more beautiful than ever.

This article intends to develop these scholarly examinations by incorporating Erich Neumann's thoughts on the Medusa myth and feminine power. Building on Mandelker's idea of literary framing, I will argue that the Medusa mythology, using Mary Evans' words, demonstrates "all that is seductive ... and potentially destructive about female sexuality" (Evans in LeBlanc, 1990, p. 20) whilst acknowledging the "moral abyss into which adultery has thrown Anna Karenina" (LeBlanc, 1990, p. 14). In other words, I argue that Neumann's ideas on Medusa mythology can help us better appreciate that Anna is not simply powerful but as powerful and powerless as an Infernal Goddess like Medusa who challenges relationships, institutions, and morality itself which the current scholarly literature has acknowledged but not fully developed.

In doing this, I want to clarify that this article will only examine how Neumann's theoretical framework applies to the character Anna to better understand her powerful (Infernal) femininity. This article will not use the character to explore Neumann's thought as it would deviate from a thorough analysis of the character. Consequently, I will not examine Neumann's wider thought on the Archetypal Feminine, The Great Mother, and how the term 'Feminine' is a "symbolic" and "transpersonal" expression (Neumann, 1954/2014a, p. xxii) which "must not be reduced to biological or sociological terms" (Neumann, 1954/2014a, p. xxii). Furthermore, I will not explore how these concepts progress through Anima, Unconscious, Consciousness, and into figures in the World. This deliberate omission should not block subsequent thought from exploring such a possibility. My

intention is to use Neumann to analyse Anna which will create an opportunity for future research to re-examine Neumann's thought on Femininity through the character herself.

I will structure my article in the following way: First, I will examine the Medusa myth itself and its symbology in Neumann's philosophy. I will then apply the myth to the character of Anna. This will involve looking at several key characteristics of Anna and how they correlate to the Goddess Medusa. Finally, I shall explore Levin's moral transformation due to Anna. In this section, I shall argue that the reflection of Medusa in Perseus' shield is structurally similar to Mandelker's concept of the literary framing of Anna.

The Medusa Mythology and Symbolism

In viewing Anna through the lens of the Medusa myth, I am not merely arguing that both are powerful women who men have tried to conquer and tame. Instead, I am arguing that there are mechanical similarities between Anna and Medusa which provides a new perspective on Anna. If we examine Anna through the symbols within Medusa then we can see how she becomes both a powerful and powerless Goddess who challenges men, women, Society, and morality.

To appreciate this further, I will explore key symbols within the Medusa myth such as her snake hair and petrifying gaze. Also, I will examine a key feature in the myth which concerns the beheading of the Goddess. These symbols provide an insight into Anna's interactions with other characters. It can achieve this through the structural similarities of the Medusa myth to Anna's non-verbal "phatic" (Mandelker, 1993, p. 3) communication.

The Medusa Myth

The "slaying of the Medusa" is a "primordial" (Neumann 1954/2014a, p. 218) and symbolic myth that has been "told and retold since antiquity" (Adler, 2009, p. 240). Although there is a "dizzying array of variations" (Adler, 2009, p. 240) of the Medusa myth, there are central key features of the story depicted "by storytellers from Homer to Ovid, that has generally been accepted as the definitive myth of Medusa" (Leeming, 2013, p. 10). Medusa is the only mortal sister of the three Gorgon sisters. The Goddess Athena punished Medusa for either having "dallied with" or having "been raped by" Poseidon in the Temple of Athena (Garber and Vickers, 2003, p. 2). Medusa's punishment was to be exiled whilst her hair was to be turned into a nest of snakes with a "deadly stare" that could turn "men into stone" (Adler, 2009, p. 240). Eventually, Medusa is slain and decapitated by Zeus' son Perseus. To decapitate her, "Perseus outsmarted Medusa by looking at her in the reflection of his shield" (Adler, 2009, p. 241) which rendered her deadly gaze harmless.

There are symbols within the Medusa myth which can help us better understand the true extent of Anna's feminine power. The first symbol centers on Medusa as a powerful and destructive force. In the myth, Perseus appropriates Medusa's head "as a device for his own protection" (Garber and Vickers, 2003, p.2). Additionally, Medusa's head becomes a divine object as it is displayed on the Aegis of Athena to "subdue her foes" (Garber and Vickers, 2003, p. 2). In Homer's *The Iliad*, Medusa's powerful force is harnessed by Athena as she prepares for war (Homer, c.750-725 BCE). In Palaephatus' *Daughters of Phorcys*, we see a version of the Medusa myth where Perseus engages in "piratical raids" (Palaephatus in Garber and Vickers 2003, p. 21) and after killing Medusa he places her head on a ship. In Palaephatus' account, Perseus uses Medusa's head as a weapon to extort money under the threat of being turned into "man-sized stones" (Palaephatus in Garber and Vickers 2003, p. 22). Essentially, the myth holds that, under the control of Perseus and Athena, Medusa's head becomes a dangerous weapon for warfare and self-protection. This idea of protection, however, stemming from Medusa's head predates Homer. Judith Suther highlights that "the Greeks used the Gorgon head as a talismanic mask on clothing, coins, weapons and other objects long before the time of Homer" (Suther in Leeming, 2013, p. 20). In relation to Anna, this article will examine how she uses her gaze as a tool for either scrutinizing people or as a weapon.

Additionally, there are other symbols in the Medusa myth which can be applied to Anna. For example, Christine de Pizan offers an argument centered on Medusa's "striking beauty" which can render "every mortal creature upon whom she looked ... immovable" (Pizan in Garber and Vickers, 2003, p. 57). She continues: the "amazing and supernatural" beauty of Medusa with "her long and curly ... hair" enchanted people to the extent the "fable claimed that they had turned to stone" (Pizan in Garber and Vickers, 2003, p. 57). In this account, people are not being turned to stone due to Medusa's acts of force. Instead, her beautiful femininity itself enchants and immobilizes people. I will later argue that Anna's beauty and curly hair resonates with the Medusa myth and has a similar immobilizing effect on men and women.

Furthermore, Medusa represents the power of transformation. In Hesiod's *Theogony* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, once Perseus slays the Gorgon, Pegasus and Chrysaör are born from her blood (Hesiod, c.700 BCE in Garber and Vickers, 2003). In death, Medusa becomes a creative and transformative power. This transformative power emanating from Medusa is apparent in Anna too. Anna is a figure of moral transformation for Levin; and, in death, she transforms the moral perspective surrounding suicide.

I want to stress, however, that I am not advocating that Tolstoy embedded these symbols of the Medusa myth into his writing of *Anna Karenina*. Rather, I intend to use Neumann's treatment of the Medusa symbology to interpret and re-envision the depth of Anna's character.

The Symbolism of Medusa – Neumann's Framework

Before examining Neumann's thoughts on Medusa, it is prudent to note a relevant criticism of his approach. Camille Paglia sums the criticism: "Neumann's manipulation of material is improvisational rather than schematic, though he does draft illustrative psychic graphs that will inevitably seem quirky or bogus to the non-Jungian" (Paglia, 2006, p. 10-11). This "improvisational" approach, however, is necessary when applying the Medusa myth to Anna Karenina because the flexibility of Neumann's framework can accommodate both the myth itself and the character of Anna. Neumann's approach of "removing historical artifacts and documents from their cultural context" (Pasto, 1958, p. 129) may appear "bogus" but this fluidity allows for a creative "art form" (Paglia, 2006, p. 12) to construct "a universal view of mankind, a mankind which embraces a multiplicity of cultures and goals" (Pasto, 1958, p. 129). The flexibility and fluidity within Neumann's philosophy, including his views on the symbolism of the Medusa myth, provides an interpretative model which can be applied to Anna. Consequently, we can better understand the true and Infernal Femininity of Anna.

For Neumann, there are several important features of the Medusa myth that provide an insight into femininity. Neumann examines one feature of the Medusa myth which concerns the early artistic depictions of the Goddess as being part-Centaur. This article, however, will not explore this part of the myth. Although in *Anna Karenina* there is an allusion that Vronsky's relationship to his racehorse Frou-Frou is equivalent to that of Anna herself, there are stronger characteristics and symbols within the Medusa myth which can be applied to Anna.

Initially, Neumann provides the following description of Medusa: "[S]erpent-haired and serpent-engirdled, tusked like boars, bearded and barbed, and with protruding tongues, are uroboric symbols of what we might justly call 'the Infernal Feminine'" (Neumann, 1954/2014a, p. 214). Neumann, however, goes on to emphasize the importance and power of Medusa's gaze. For Neumann, the "petrifying gaze of Medusa" is a category of the "Terrible Great Goddess" and "Terrible Mother" (Neumann, 1955/2015b, p. 166). Since Medusa's gaze can render men "rigid" this is in a sense "terrible" because it "stands in opposition to the mobility of life" (Neumann, 1955/2015b, p. 166). Ultimately, Medusa is the "Infernal Feminine" (Neumann, 1954/2014a, p. 214), a 'fallen' Goddess with a "destructive will" (Neumann, 1954/2014a, p. 178).

Medusa is the "Terrible" and "Infernal" woman that the male "hero" must overcome (Neumann 1955/2015b, p. 168). The chief weapon of Medusa is her stare. Neumann notes that "to look directly

upon the Gorgon's features is to risk certain death by being instantly turned to stone" (Neumann, 1954/2014a, p. 214). This is because the "power of [Medusa] is too overwhelming for any consciousness to tackle direct. Only by indirect means, when reflected ... can the Gorgon be destroyed" (Neumann, 1954/2014a, p. 216). Therefore, the reflection of Medusa's face in Athene's shield provides Perseus with the opportunity "to kill her" with Zeus' sword (Neumann, 1954/2014a, p. 214). The decapitation of Medusa indicates that the "primordial power of the female has been subdued" (Neumann, 1954/2014a, p. 217). For Neumann, the "fact that Perseus then gives the Gorgon's head to Athene, and that she emblazons it upon her shield, crowns this whole development as ... [a] victory" (Neumann, 1954/2014a, p. 217). In essence, it is a celebration of the subjugation of Infernal Feminine power with Athene now wearing "the Gorgon's head as a trophy upon her shield" (Neumann, 1954/2014a, p. 217).

For Neumann, the "snake hair of the Terrible Goddess corresponds ... to a 'negative radiation'" (Neumann, 1955/2015b, p. 168). This negative radiation is the representation of the destructive feminine power of the Terrible Goddess and Terrible Mother. The "snake hair" is a destructive force of the Terrible Goddess and Terrible Mother because it stands in contrast to the symbol of the skull which is associated with the Great Mother. For Neumann, the "Gorgon is the counterpart of the life womb" and the "skull is a symbol...of death" (Neumann, 1955/2015b, p. 166). The "bald" skull, found amongst "shaven priests of Isis to the ... Catholic monks" are "initiates of the Great Mother" (Neumann, 1955/2015b, p. 166-167). In contrast, Medusa, the Terrible Goddess, with her snake hair is antagonistic to the bald skull. The snakes on the Terrible Mother's head 'radiate' destruction rather than a personal choice of "sacrifice" and "castration" (Neumann, 1955/2015b, p. 166) to the Great Mother.

Medusa's destructive snake hair is more deeply appreciated when seen in conjunction with the characteristic of the protruding boar tusks. The protruding boar tusks from Medusa's mouth are an important sexual symbol in the myth. Neumann places considerable emphasis on the connection between the boar tusks and the mouth. Neumann writes:

Probably the most primitive and most ancient of the pig associations is with the female genitals, which even in Greek and Latin were called 'pig' ... Wherever the eating of pork is forbidden and the pig is held to be unclean, we may be sure of its originally sacred character. The association of pigs with fertility and sexual symbolism lingers on into own day, where sexual matters are still negatively described as 'swinishness' (Neumann, 1954/2014a, p. 85-86).

Therefore, sacred sexual power resides in Medusa's tusks as they derive from a boar and the associations of sex with "swinishness". Neumann elaborates on this feminine sexual power by highlighting that there is both a "destructive side of the Feminine" with her "womb" and "positive femininity of the womb ... as a mouth." Neumann continues to state that "lips' are attributed to the female genitals" and are indicative of feminine sexual power and are called the "upper womb" (Neumann, 1955/2015b, p. 168). This mouth, with its powerful feminine lips, is deeply connected to Medusa's snake hair. Neumann writes:

The gnashing mouth of the Medusa with its boar's tusks ... [and] protruding tongue is obviously connected with the phallus. The snapping – i.e., castrating – womb appears as the jaws of hell, and the serpents writhing round the Medusa's head are not personalistic – pubic hairs – but aggressive phallic elements characterizing the fear aspect of the uroboric womb (Neumann, 1954/2014a, p. 87).

Medusa's "overwhelming" (Neumann, 1954/2014a, p. 216) feminine power is a petrifying force to masculinity. Despite Perseus successfully killing Medusa, Neumann considers him to be "barely man enough" to execute the task (Neumann, 1954/2014a, p. 215). Ultimately, Medusa's stare and gaze is such a formidable weapon that only the framing of her face in Perseus' shield provides an opportunity for Perseus to kill the Goddess. This framing of powerful femininity allows men to non-fatally engage with the feminine form.

Anna's Characteristics and Medusa

The following section will explore some of Anna's characteristics through the lens of the Medusa myth. First, there will be an examination of Anna's gaze and hair. Anna uses her gaze to not only render men rigid but also as a tool to display her feminine power. Similarly, her hair can demonstrate her Infernal Femininity. Second, we turn to an important feature in both the Medusa's and Anna's death. With the former, her head is decapitated; the latter retains her head. This is significant because Medusa becomes a trophy on a shield, whereas Anna remains powerful in death. Although it could be argued that Medusa's head on the Aegis of Athena transforms her into a very powerful object, there is a fundamental distinction between the Gorgon and Anna. Anna chooses to remain powerful in death whereas Perseus slays Medusa which removes her autonomy in becoming a powerful object.

Anna's Gaze

Anna's eyes and gaze are important characteristics. The reader is told that Anna uses her eyesight as a "bright light in which she saw everything" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 690) and as a "search-light" to ascertain the "hidden recesses" of people's "souls" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 693). In addition, Weir notes that Anna uses her eyesight as a tool to "analyze her relationships with Dolly, Kitty, and Vronsky" (Weir, 2011, p. 144). Anna's gaze is not just reserved for men. It is a tool or weapon which can scrutinize women too.

Akin to Medusa's deadly stare, Anna's eyes are a powerful weapon which she uses to engage with the world. Anna's gaze ties with the Medusa myth in that it can demonstrate her powerful feminine expression especially with its effects upon men. There are two ways in which Anna's gaze and stare can impact men. First, Anna's stare, as with Medusa's, has the potential to render men to stone. For example, in the carriage after the race, Karenin turns his face to Anna. The narrator states that Karenin's expression was that of the "solemn immobility of the dead" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 194). Anna also looks at Vronsky in a "cold and hostile" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 638) manner which produces a "similar cold expression ... on his face" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 638).

Second, Anna's stare has the ability to entice and display her feminine power which can, to use Neumann's terminology, overwhelm men. For example, when Levin visits Anna, she gazes at him which has a mesmerizing effect on Levin.

Again she [Anna] glanced at Levin. And her smile and glance told him [Levin] that she was speaking for him alone, valuing his opinion and knowing in advance that they would understand one another. 'Yes, I quite understand,' Levin replied

After a pause she smiled (Tolstoy 1875-77/1970, p. 633).

The feminine power of Anna's gaze is attractive and appealing to Levin. We can see this in the following comment from the narrator:

Never had any clever thought uttered by Levin given him so much satisfaction as this. Anna's face brightened all over when she suddenly appreciated the remark. She laughed

'What a woman!' thought Levin, and, quite forgetting himself, he gazed fixedly at her beautiful mobile face (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 632).

Here, we can see the overwhelming tempting and enticing power of Anna's stare that emanates from her "brightened" and "beautiful" face (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 632). This, however, is ultimately dangerous for Levin as it almost jeopardizes his marriage to Kitty. Eventually, Levin confesses that "he had yielded to Anna's artful influence, and that he would avoid her in future" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 637) thereby "narrowly" escaping "her grasp" (Weir, 2011, p. 208).

In addition, when Anna dresses to attend the theatre in a "light silk dress cut low in front and trimmed with velvet" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 493), Vronsky asks if she is "really going" whilst "trying not to look at her." Anna responds: "Why do you ask in such a frightened way?" (Tolstoy,

1875-77/1970, p. 493). Vronsky is frightened because he caught sight of Anna's feminine sexuality and he can neither control nor comprehend it. Vronsky wished for Anna to not attend the theatre as he was worried that it would "acknowledge" Anna's "position as a fallen woman" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 494) but he was too fearful to exert his wishes and chose to avert his gaze away from her "brilliant beauty."

By choosing to attend the theatre, Anna is challenging her social exile as the "fallen woman." Anna does not repent her affair with Vronsky. Anna screams: "Do I repent of what I had done? No! No! No!" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 493). Anna then uses her gaze to re-assert her position and subdue Vronsky. Anna asks Vronsky: "Why don't you look at me?" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 493) upon which Vronsky looks at her. The narrator informs us: "[Vronsky] saw all the beauty of her face" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 493). Anna's stare is impotent as Vronsky says to her: "My feelings cannot change, you know that; but I beg you not to go! I entreat you!" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 493). Although Anna is unsuccessful in the use of her stare, it still demonstrates that she does try to use her gaze in a manner to exert control and regain "full mastery" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 605) over Vronsky.

One of the strongest examples, however, of Anna displaying her Medusa and 'Infernal Feminine' power is when Vronsky meets her for the first time. Upon their first meeting, Vronsky notices a "subdued animation that enlivened [Anna's] face and seemed to flutter between her bright eyes and a scarcely perceptible smile which curved her rosy lips" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 56). There is a sexual attraction to Anna with the curvature of her "rosy lips." Anna is speaking through the poetic beauty of her body drawing Vronsky closer to her through her feminine power. Levin also notices Anna's lips when gazing at her portrait. Levin is drawn to the framed and reflected – and ultimately, the harmless – sexual allure of Anna with her "upper womb." Later, we will see how Levin can gaze at Anna's lips without consequence but when Anna appears with a cigarette, with its sexual undertones, she almost compromises the sanctity of Levin's marriage.

Returning to Vronsky's first meeting with Anna, he notices the curvature of her "rosy lips" and her "bright eyes" which ignite a deep attraction within him. Both Anna's eyes and the curvature of her lips are akin to the deadly stare and tusks of the Gorgon Medusa. The "animation" in Anna's face between her eyes and lips is structurally similar to the 'Infernal Feminine' power that moves between Medusa's gaze and the Goddess' tusks. Anna's curved lips are akin to Medusa's curved boar tusks which, along with her snake hair, convey the sexual power of the Goddess' femininity.

Anna uses her "bright" eyes to draw Vronsky ever closer. For Anna, her eyes are an enticing sexual weapon just like Medusa who deploys her gaze as a potent weapon to turn men to stone. Vronsky is enchanted by the feminine power which "drives mad and fascinates ... [and is a] seducer and bringer of delight, the sovereign enchantress. The fascination of sex and the drunken orgy culminating in unconsciousness and death" (Neumann, 1954/2014a, p. 60). Vronsky does indeed become fascinated by Anna, the married woman, and pursues her. After Anna's suicide, however, Vronsky is bereft and goes to war for he is now "in the jaws of hell." Vronsky says:

I do not value my life at all and that I have physical energy enough to hack my way into a square and slay or fall – that I am sure of. I am glad that there is something for which I can lay down the life which I not only do not want, but of which I am sick! It will be of use to somebody (Tolstoy 1875-77/1970, p. 706).

Vronsky's nihilism here is the "death" that Neumann speaks of after the "fascination of sex." Anna's "bright" eyes drew Vronsky into the 'Infernal Feminine', but after her death, he is left with feelings of self-loathing.

Anna's Hair

Anna's physical appearance can also demonstrate a power similar to the Infernal Femininity of Medusa. The clearest example can be seen with Anna's hair. This sub-section will explore two ways

in which we can appreciate Anna's feminine strength through her hair. First, I will examine the curliness of Anna's hair and how that corresponds to the "negative radiation" of Medusa's snake hair. Thereafter, I will examine how the power within Anna's hair engages with male dominance. Ultimately, this power within Anna's hair leads to her self-portrait in death where she appears as a powerful heroine.

Briefly returning to Neumann, we noted earlier that he stated that the "snake hair of the Terrible Goddess corresponds ... to a 'negative radiation'." This "negative radiation", which stems from the snake hair of Medusa, correlates with Anna's curly hair. I shall now argue that this negative radiation can be seen in two ways regarding Anna's hair. Anna's hair radiates both supernatural and seductive qualities which interact with men. Looking ahead a little, I shall argue that once Anna is framed within Mikhailov's portrait, men are able to gaze at her without having to engage with her 'Infernal Femininity' and negative radiation. For now, we can unpack how Anna's hair radiates these supernatural and seductive qualities.

At the ball, Kitty's jealousy after seeing Anna interacting with her fiancé, Vronsky, alters her once significant admiration and perception of Anna. For Kitty, Anna starts to develop an appearance which one can categorize as being like a Gorgon – Medusa, herself. The narrator notes:

Anna smiled – and the smile passed on to him [Vronsky]; she became thoughtful – and he became serious. Some supernatural power attracted Kitty's eyes to Anna's face. She looked charming in her simple black dress; her full arms with the bracelets, her firm neck with the string of pearls round it, her curly hair now disarranged, every graceful movement of her small feet and hands, her handsome face, – everything about her was enchanting, but there was something terrible and cruel in her charm (Tolstoy 1875–77/1970, p. 76).

Moments later, Kitty thinks to herself: "Yes, there is something strange, satanic, and enchanting about her [Anna]" (Tolstoy, 1875–77/1970, p. 76). Anna's "disarranged" hair is part of her seductive charm. It is Anna's "negative radiation" stemming from her hair that Kitty is perceiving as "satanic." Kitty is observing the "Terrible Goddess" who is drawing closer to her fiancé.

Furthermore, when Anna visits Dolly for the first time, the reader is informed of Anna's "black tresses, which always catch on something" (Merezhkovsky in Tolstoy, 1875–77/1970, p. 770). D. S. Merezhkovsky points out that in "those unruly curls ... there is such tension, 'the sign of something' ever-ready for passion, as there is in the extremely bright glitter of her eyes ... [and] in ... [her] smile" (Merezhkovsky in Tolstoy, 1875–77/1970, p. 770). The unruliness of Anna's hair thus demonstrates that femininity is beyond physical confinement and instead pulsates like the "negative radiation" coming from Medusa's "snake hair."

Anna's hair represents the multiplicity of her internal strength and feminine power which are at their lowest ebb in the novel when her hair is short. We can see the power within Anna's hair through its relationship with two central male characters – her husband, Karenin, and her lover, Vronsky. Both figures attempt to exert dominance over Anna which involves her head and curly hair.

Karenin and Vronsky can comprehend and dominate the Gorgon power of Anna when her hair is short. For example, Anna, due to the trauma of childbirth, became weak and feared an attack from Karenin. The narrator informs the reader: "Suddenly she [Anna] recoiled, became silent and frightened, and put her arms before her face as if in expectation of a blow, she had seen her husband" (Tolstoy, 1875–77/1970, p. 375). Anna protects her head and face from a potentially imminent attack due to Karenin's position of dominance. Otherwise, like Medusa, Anna could lose all her power and life at the hands of a male. Also, Karenin notices something in Anna after she was recovering from her illness due to childbirth: "Karenin began to notice that Anna feared him, was oppressed by his presence, and avoided looking at him straight in the eyes" (Tolstoy, 1875–77/1970, p. 382). Karenin noticing that Anna is not looking at him re-asserts his dominance. In her weakened state, one of Anna's most powerful weapons – her "bright" eyes – are not staring at him which has the power to turn his expression into the "solemn immobility of the dead." Consequently, this allows

Karenin to force his opinion that she still looks "feverish" despite her claims that she is feeling "better" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 384). Without her Medusa-like stare, Anna cannot resist against male oppression which is trying to subdue her.

Additionally, Vronsky attempts to diminish Anna due to her "cropped" hair (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 395). The narrator tells the reader that despite Anna's "black hair" being "cropped short", it was "already growing again like a thick brush over her round head" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 384). When, however, Vronsky visits Anna a month before leaving for abroad, she takes his hand and places it on her "cold cheek and cropped hair" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 395). Vronsky remarks: "I don't know you with this short hair! You have improved so, you little boy! – But how pale you are!" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 395). In this sense, Vronsky is exerting his male dominance over Anna. Consequently, Anna's Medusa and feminine power is significantly diminished as the 'radiating snakes' around her head are cropped but they are not extinguished.

In death, Anna's curly hair becomes a significant symbol which pushes against domineering masculinity. The "heavy plaits" and "curls" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 707) around Anna's temples, frames her as the powerful Medusa-heroine. Anna's suicide and the plaits and curls, which frame her face, complete her "self-portrait" (Mandelker, 1993, p. 104). Anna's suicide characterizes her as a powerful heroine. Since her head remains intact, she does not suffer the same fate as Medusa. Perseus was triumphant over Medusa; however, Vronsky feels that Anna was triumphant. Anna does not throw herself in front of the train for the sake or in the absence of love. Anna's suicide is not an act of a 'fallen' woman but that of a 'heroine' who has remained steadfast against male dominance. Now, Anna is the one who is delivering the 'deathblow' rather than living in fear of receiving a 'blow' from a man.

Framing Anna – A Reinvention of Perseus' Shield

In Italy, the artist Mikhaylov paints Anna. For Weir, there is "something in Anna that provokes the best art of the entire novel, Mikhaylov's portrait of her" (Weir, 2011, p. 208) which is a significant event in the novel. The narrator informs us:

After the fifth sitting the portrait struck every one not only by its likeness but also by its beauty. It was strange that Mikhaylov had been able to discover that special beauty. 'One needed to know and love her as I love her, to find just that sweetest spiritual expression of hers,' thought Vronsky (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 433-434).

The framing of Anna in Mikhaylov's portrait provides an insight into Anna's Infernal Femininity. Concerning framing, Mandelker writes:

What seems to be true in the case of both painting or verbal art is that the action of framing, enclosing, and outlining seems in itself to impose an absolute perspective; the frame serves not so much as a break between the real and the represented worlds as an indexical arrow directed inward. Drawing a frame thus draws a conclusion, as if what has been chosen to be framed is intended to serve as the absolute symbol of itself (Mandelker, 1993, p. 92-93).

Crucially, Mikhaylov's portrait provides a safe symbol of Anna herself. The *real* Anna is a dangerous and seductive force but the portrait imitates her without jeopardizing her "special beauty" and "likeness." The frame of the portrait confines Anna – a harmless Anna – which Levin can engage with. The process of looking at the portrait and meeting the real Anna contributes to Levin's moral transformation.

Levin experiences a sense of conquering Anna who occupies the moral and societal position of a 'fallen woman' due to abandoning her son as a result of her adultery. Both Karenin and Vronsky categorize Anna as 'fallen' in some sense. In Part V, the reader is given an insight into Vronsky's thoughts on Anna attending the opera. For Vronsky, if Anna were to attend the opera with Princess Betsy "dressed" as she was then this would "acknowledge" her "position as a fallen woman" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 494). Since Anna attends the theatre with the gaze of Society upon her, she has

become the 'fallen woman.' Furthermore, Karenin considers Anna to be a "depraved" and "despicable woman" who has "committed a crime" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 254) whose "guilt should meet with retribution" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 257).

For LeBlanc, Levin completes a process of moral transformation when he meets Anna, the 'fallen woman.' LeBlanc writes: "In Part I, Levin had acted like a puritanical prig, heartlessly condemning as horrible moral abominations the painted Frenchwoman at the restaurant" (Le Blanc, 1990, p. 16). For Levin, those "painted" Frenchwomen with their "curls out ... are an abomination" and are considered to be "creatures" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 38). In fact, Levin expresses to Oblonsky that he has "a horror of fallen women" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 38). These 'fallen women', with their sexual freedom, are morally repugnant to Levin. According to LeBlanc, Levin's "willingness" (LeBlanc, 1990, p. 16), however, to visit Anna, which is "metaphorized as a trip to a brothel" (Le Blanc, 1990, p. 15)⁹, indicates "the tremendous progress he has made during the novel toward overcoming his narrow moral righteousness" (LeBlanc, 1990, p. 16). LeBlanc characterizes this as a "process at work" whereby "the hero gradually loses his innocence and compromises his values as he becomes less a 'savage' and more a 'civilized' nobleman" (LeBlanc, 1990, p. 15). Levin moves from being "more and more in doubt as to whether he was acting well or badly" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 630) to eventually pitying Anna (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 634). Levin, for LeBlanc, has "grown" with "human understanding" and "Christian compassion and forgiveness, that he is now able and willing to appreciate the beauty, intelligence and sincerity of the novel's central 'fallen woman,' the curly-haired Anna herself" (Le Blanc, 1990, p. 17).

LeBlanc's mapping of Levin's journey of becoming a civilized nobleman is seen in reference to appreciating the fallen and "curly-haired" Anna. The curly-haired Anna can be linked to the curls of the Frenchwoman who filled Levin with horror and loathing. The framing of Anna in Mikhaylov's portrait, however, has allowed Levin to comprehend her sexual and feminine nature:

He forgot where he was, and ... gazed fixedly at the wonderful portrait. It was not a picture, but a living and charming woman with curly black hair, bare shoulders and arms, and a dreamy half-smile on lips covered with elegant down, looking at him victoriously and tenderly with eyes that troubled him (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 630).

Anna's ideal feminine beauty and sexual allure are framed in the portrait where "she was more beautiful than a living woman could be" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 630). Upon meeting Anna, "the very woman whom he had admired in the portrait" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 630), she is described to be "less brilliant, but there was something about her new and attractive which was not in the portrait" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 630). The real Anna is an alive and "attractive" sexual power which can threaten the sanctity of Levin's marriage. Levin is drawn to Anna's real "lips" which can smoke a cigarette thus carrying significant sexual undertones (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 630). Furthermore, the real Anna responds to Levin's gaze whereas the portrait, the framed Anna, does not. Consequently, Levin becomes aware that his glances "from the portrait to the original" produces a "special brightness" on Anna's face since "she felt his eyes on her" (Tolstoy, 1875-77/1970, p. 631).

Similarly, staring at the real Medusa has consequences. Medusa is a powerful being and deadly to the male gaze. When Medusa is framed in Perseus' shield, however, her feminine and sexual power are rendered harmless. In relation to Anna, men can now stare at her in the portrait without the fatal consequences of attraction upon their marriages and relationships. Although the real Anna is "less brilliant" than the portrait, like Medusa, her sexual and Infernal Feminine power is far stronger in reality than when framed. Levin is 'safe' when looking at the portrait, just as Perseus is safer when Medusa is reflected in his shield.

With the portrait, the male viewer's gaze excavates the power of the female. It can be stated that "[w]hen Perseus slays Medusa he removes the 'monstrous' threat" (Leeming, 2013, p. 78) of the feminine gaze, man "is now free to look at her without her looking back at him" (Adler, 2009, p. 243). Although Anna's portrait can invoke feelings and impressions in Levin – feelings which dem-

onstrate that Anna is victorious over him – he is safe despite being unable to “tear himself away from it” (Tolstoy, 1875–77/1970, p. 630). However, the real Anna can engage with his gaze and, if she pleases, “awaken love in Levin (as at that time she always did to all the young men she met)” (Tolstoy, 1875–77/1970, p. 637).

The longer Levin converses with Anna, he notices her “sincerity” (Tolstoy, 1875–77/1970, p. 634) in addition to her “intelligence, grace, and beauty” (Tolstoy, 1875–77/1970, p. 634). In fact, Anna’s face “seemed even more beautiful than before” (Tolstoy, 1875–77/1970, p. 634) when Levin “again looked at that portrait and at her figure...he felt a tenderness and pity for her which surprised him” (Tolstoy, 1875–77/1970, p. 634). The portrait of Anna allows Levin to not only appreciate her but, in a sense, conquer his moral pre-conceptions of ‘fallen’ women and see her as a figure of pity. Mandelker writes that Levin’s “encounter with Anna, an educated woman of high society with a complex, sensitive character, necessarily breaks the frame of his own expectations and provokes in him not the feeling of disgust he had anticipated” (Mandelker, 1993, p. 113) but, as the narrator informs us, a sense of pity. Levin “who had formerly judged her so severely, now by some strange process of reasoning justified her and at the same time pitied her” (Tolstoy, 1875–77/1970, p. 634). Levin morally transforms his “horror of fallen women” by pitying Anna’s ‘Infernal’ femininity.

From looking at Anna’s portrait, a process is initiated whereby Levin pities her and is able to overcome his moral repugnance towards “fallen women.” Anna is a Gorgon – Medusa – the Terrible Goddess of feminine power, who is overcome by the hero, Levin. The shield of Perseus is substituted for the framed portrait. Anna’s portrait is an imitation of her feminine sexual attraction. Although Levin was captivated by the real Anna, the imitation of feminine power within the portrait renders Anna not only an object of art but a figure of pity.

In classical mythology, Medusa is a marginalized and “monstrously deformed figure” (Leeming, 2013, p. 35). However, it “was not until the story was taken up allegorically in the Middle Ages that Perseus is in any sense threatened morally by Medusa” (Leeming, 2013, p. 35). Within this framework, “Perseus [is] the personification of virtue’ who defeats “the evil tendencies represented by Medusa” (Leeming, 2013, p. 35). Similarly, Levin can ‘conquer’ the erotic and seductive qualities and tendencies of the feminine power and recalibrate his moral compass to become more understanding of the position of ‘fallen women’ in society. Mandelker writes that:

[Levin’s] revelation before Anna’s portrait initiates the spiritual conversion he will achieve by the close of the novel ... [and] ... his recognition of and tolerance for the imperfection of human life and his resulting compassion ... [Levin] thus plays the role of Christ asked to judge the fallen woman (Mandelker, 1993, p. 115).

If seen through the Medusa myth, then Levin’s moral transformation is not just being a case of re-evaluating his values of “fallen women” but as conquering the ‘Terrible Goddess’ and the ‘Infernal Feminine.’

Conclusion

Anna is a complex character who not only leaves a firm impression on other characters but forms significant relationships with them too. The Goddess Medusa is a powerful and powerless figure in mythology. Similarly, by using the frameworks provided by Mandelker and Neumann, we can better understand the extent of Anna’s powerfulness and powerlessness. Anna, like Medusa, is a formidable challenge to Society, masculinity, and femininity itself. The Medusa myth can help us appreciate Anna as a heroine who is challenged by masculine counterparts and overcomes them. Furthermore, the Medusa myth allows us to understand the true power of Anna’s femininity. It is a femininity which is terrifying and yet enticing to men and women.

Notes

- ¹ I would like to thank Professor Justin Weir (Harvard University) who has been a source of inspiration, encouragement, and support during my study of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.
- ² Hesiod, Homer, Ovid, Palaephatus.
- ³ Caravaggio and Leonardo da Vinci.
- ⁴ Dante, Goethe, Percy Bysshe Shelley.
- ⁵ Christine de Pizan and Hélène Cixous.
- ⁶ Sigmund Freud and Eric Neumann.
- ⁷ Amy Adler.
- ⁸ Gianni Versace.
- ⁹ LeBlanc references Irina Gutkin's "The Dichotomy between Flesh and Spirit: Plato's Symposium in Anna Karenina" in *In the Shade of the Giant: Essays on Tolstoy*, ed. Hugh McLean (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) to emphasise that Levin and Oblonsky's trip to see Anna as akin to visiting a brothel. From Gutkin's observation that food and sex are involved in the meetings between Levin and Oblonsky, LeBlanc states that the a pattern has emerged where the reader expects 'sexual love after an evening of eating at the club.' (LeBlanc, 1990, p. 8, footnote. 17)

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Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan*: Tamil Modernity, Revivalism and the Popular Historical Novel

CATHERINE SHILPA X & MERIN SIMI RAJ

Abstract: The *Ponniyin Selvan* (*Ponni's Son*) novels by Kalki, serialized from 1950 to 1954 and set during the medieval ages in the Tamil country against the backdrop of a power struggle between and within the two South Indian dynasties of the Cholas and the Pandyas, during the reign of Parantaka II (also known as Sundara Chola) roughly from 958 CE to 973 CE, represent a format of the historical novel that addressed the post-independence anxieties about language, tradition and regional identity within popular Tamil print culture in the 1940s and 1950s. Kalki's historical romances were written amidst specific socio-political movements that gained momentum in the early and mid-twentieth century. This article situates the revivalist and reformist agendas espoused by nationalists such as Kalki in the twentieth century within the context of the ideological shifts and turbulences in Tamil political and public spheres concerning Tamil language and literary history, through an analysis of the *Ponniyin Selvan* series as a representative text of this shifting context of Tamil identity formation, as a popular historical novel and a collective memory text.

Keywords: Kalki, fictions of memory, nostalgia, Revivalism, Dravidianism, Tamil modernity, collective text

“Kalki” Krishnamurthy's *Ponniyin Selvan* (*Ponni's Son*) is a multi-volume historical novel set in the backdrop of the succession crises in the Chola dynasty in tenth century AD. These novels were serialized in the author's own magazine *Kalki* from 1950 to 1954. Immensely popular at the time of their publication, they were subsequently consolidated into five volumes in 1955. During the 1940s, the period when Kalki's historical romances were serialized, the magazine's circulation reached 71,000 every week, the highest for any weekly periodical in the country (Sunda 13). They are arguably the most popular historical novels in Tamil and still continue to be read and reprinted in different editions. The recent film adaptation proved to be a commercial success, spawning several more translations of the novels. It is in the context of its growing popularity and resonance across generations that this article aims to read *Ponniyin Selvan* as a vehicle and repository of collective memory. This article, thus, proposes to situate these novels within the matrix of the Tamil Revivalist movement and the Dravidian movement of the first half of the twentieth century which decisively shaped the politics and the boundaries of the state of Tamil Nadu for the subsequent decades. In doing so, it further highlights the role that cultural memory plays within the contradictory impulses of modernity, manifested as the concurrent desire for progress and the nostalgia for tradition, as those who would uphold Tamil cultural pride “consciously and strategically recuperated the archaic in the very name of the modern nation.” (Ramaswamy, “Fabulous Geographies” 16) The author Kalki will therefore also be situated in the historiographical tradition of Tamil modernity in order to productively engage with his fictional work that had strong historical, cultural as well as political undertones.

Ramaswamy Krishnamurthy, better known by his pen name Kalki, was an Indian writer, journalist, poet, critic and Indian independence activist. He wrote essays, short stories and political tracts in

popular journals and magazines of the 1930s, '40s and '50s such as *Navasakthi*, *Vimochanam* and *Ananda Vikatan* and founded his own magazine *Kalki* in 1941. His novels of nationalism, social-realism and medieval history were serialized in these magazines. Kalki's deliberate choice in writing about a critical era in the centuries-long Chola dynasty, reminiscent of the fraught period in post-Independence Tamil Nadu seems to be based on the implication that chaos inevitably precedes and follows 'glorious' historical moments. The tensions and contradictions within the narrative of the text must be examined in relation to Kalki's own politics and his situation within Tamil modernity. The *Ponniyin Selvan* novels reflect the emergence of certain forms of historical research, artwork and political mobilization in Tamil Nadu during the 1940s and the ways in which people constructed a sense of the past that represented the transformation in their lived realities. The concept of 'collective texts', in this article, is meant to describe literature's function as a circulation medium that disseminates and shapes cultural memory and the *Ponniyin Selvan* novels in Tamil Nadu continue to act as a popular medium. The novels are essentially a sequence of conspiracies and political intrigues that supposedly dominated the final days of the reign of King Parantaka II (also known as Sundara Chola) who ruled roughly from 958 CE to 973 CE. The primary conflict surrounding the question of succession is further complicated by attacks and assassination plots from the neighboring kingdom of the Pandyas.

The Cholas who largely form the cast of characters of these novels were an ancient South Indian dynasty whose legacy continues to be marked through place names in Tamil Nadu and literary and film dramatizations of the high points of their reign. They are part of the Southern dynasty triumvirate—the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas—who dominate the popular understanding and imagining of the medieval landscape of South India. The Cholas, like the Pandyas, were renowned for, among other things, their patronage of the arts and literature; and in turn, the poets composed songs and verses of the various feats of the kings and sometimes the upheavals within their governance. They used Tamil as an official state language, along with Sanskrit; and the poets they patronized created a courtly milieu in which several of the Tamil literary masterpieces were composed. The Cholas also feature extensively in the canon of Sangam literature, the earliest known literature in South India, which is now an important part of collective Tamil consciousness in the modern Dravidianist culture and politics of Tamil Nadu.

Cultural Memory and Tamil Revivalism through the Novel

It is important to highlight the role of Tamil revivalism in canonizing and propagating a specific image of ancient Tamil history and civilization. Tamil politicians of the post-independence era often used the Chola reign as a symbol of a utopian Dravidian nation and at times publicly attributed their understanding of ancient Tamil history to Kalki's novels at political rallies and in their pamphlets. Su Venkatesan, a writer and politician says that *Ponniyin Selvan* was first published at a time when Tamilians were rediscovering their identity.

It could have been unintentional that the novel was serialized at a time when the Dravidian movement was gaining ground in Tamil Nadu. When the politics of culture was being mainstreamed, *Ponniyin Selvan* sat well with it. Until it was published, many of us knew of Cholas only through Sangam poetry, which did not give a complete picture. *Ponniyin Selvan* brought to us the vast and fertile culture of Chola dynasty in all its glory. In that sense, it was complete.

The rhetoric of collective memory as an ensemble of narrative forms which provokes "the naturalization of a literary text as a medium of memory" as defined by Astrid Erll is reflected in Kalki's memory-making texts. According to Erll, literature permeates and resonates in memory culture and literary texts fulfil a multitude of mnemonic functions, such as the imaginative creation of past lifeworlds, the transmission of images of history, the negotiation of competing memories, and the reflection about processes and problems of cultural memory (Erll 157). By his own admission to his

friends and contemporaries, Kalki wanted to promote popular interest in Tamil history and share his own research into and passion for Tamil political and cultural history. He includes in *Ponniyin Selvan*, references to the historical ruins and monuments to fallen warriors in different parts of Tamil Nadu that he visited as part of his research. For instance, he refers to the practice of building memorial temples called Pallipadai in Tamil villages, for war heroes: "In those days, it was a practice to build memorial temples for war heroes. These temples were called Pallipadai. Near Kudandhai, there was a small village called Thirupurampayam, where a Pallipadai was built for the Ganga King Prathivipithan, in memory of his heroic deeds in the gory wars that took place here." (Krishnamurthy 130; Vol. 1)

Literary historiography in Tamil Nadu has been an important exercise in reclaiming Tamil cultural identity in the years immediately preceding and succeeding Indian independence from British colonialism. If cultural memory can be defined as "the characteristic store of repeatedly used texts, images and rituals in the cultivation of which each society and epoch stabilizes and imports its self-image; a collectively shared knowledge of preferably (yet not exclusively) the past, on which a group bases its awareness of unity and character" (Assman and Czaplicka 125–133), then the cultivation of a collective self-image in modern Tamil Nadu can be attributed to the evolution of reading, writing, and artistic production in the turn of the twentieth century. Soon after the Tamil publishing industry established itself there was a slew of journals, periodicals, and serialized novels in print, along with the compiling and publication of centuries-old archived literary classics¹. This led to a Tamil Revivalism in literature, art and cinema from the 1930s onwards, emerging from the work of scholars on Tamil language and literature in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Around sixty periodicals in Tamil were launched in the next two decades. While many of these journals were also staunchly nationalistic and carried cartoons lampooning the British administration, the rediscovery and publication of classics of the Sangam period—circa third to fifth century AD—by U.V Swaminatha Aiyar in 1900, brought to light a 'glorious' part of Tamil history. Literary dialogue glorifying Tamil language and culture became an element of literary, theatrical, and filmic entertainment (Bhaskaran 52).

The publication of the Sangam classics² and the historical visions this process inspired were very rapidly recruited 'to fashion a new identity for Tamils' at the very first tentative signs of Tamil nationalism, with language at the center of its program. Linguism or language-based ethnicity was never dominant in premodern India—though, according to David Shulman, there is at least one example of *tamilar*, the 'Tamils', serving as a collective socio-cultural category in the medieval South. By the early twentieth century, identity-driven linguism was a major force in the Tamil country and has remained so to this day. The re-entry into circulation of the Sangam classics generated a new literary canon, which is often identified as a product of secularization—since the regnant canon of premodern times was largely organized around a hierarchy of religious texts. However, it is not so much that Tamil literature was secularized at the turn of the twentieth century as that it was radically nationalized and appropriated by a rising, largely non-Brahmin, non-Dalit elite (Shulman 306). There has been a substantial output of literary writing from Dalit writers and non-Brahmin non-Dalit caste groups in recent years and progressive movements within the state have changed the composition of academic and literary circles, though not to a large extent. The scholarly and creative writing pantheon of modern Tamil Nadu involves a significant number of upper caste writers, and Kalki's positioning as a Brahmin intellectual is significant in this context.

The Tamil Renaissance movement originating in 1905 co-existed with a non-Brahmin movement built on the legacy of the missionaries and later evolving into Dravidian nationalism. The proliferation of research into ancient Tamil culture at the turn of the nineteenth century also consequently led to a significant output in studies on ancient Tamil literature along with the increased popularity of historical fiction in the first half of the twentieth century. Kalki's historical romances were written for a prodigious and eager magazine readership and evolved amidst specific socio-

political movements. In different eras within the late 19th and 20th centuries to the present day, *Tamil Thanmai* or Tamilness “as a sense of being and a sense of self, has been historically constructed through an evocation of antiquity. This evocation oscillates between mythology and history.” (Arasu 23)

In the representative novels and films of these decades, reformist values coexist with cultural orthodoxies and Dravidian regionalism is offset by a nationalist agenda. The ancient past of the country and the past of the Tamil people were reimagined in order to suit the nationalist and Dravidian political agenda. This is evident in films such as *Mathrubhoomi* (*Motherland*) (1939) which was based on Alexander’s invasion of India, an allegory to the British conquest and occupation of India. This near-mythical historical consciousness is also present in *Mandhirikumari* (*The Minister’s Daughter*) (1950), an adaptation of one of the five Tamil classic epics, *Kundalakesi*, but with a distinct rationalist edge, particularly in the dialogues of the Dravidian movement ideologue M.Karunanidhi who would subsequently become chief minister of Tamil Nadu for five intermittent terms.

Tamil Modernity, Dravidian Identity and Literature

The *Ponniyin Selvan* novels were written at a time when the influence of the nationalist movement was waning and a modern, more political form of the Dravidian movement was gaining currency in mainstream society. The origins of the Dravidian Movement are often traced to the late nineteenth century with the articulation of a linguistic identity and self-affirmation for those that spoke Dravidian languages and lived in the southern peninsula of the Indian subcontinent – the colonial Madras Presidency. While those speaking other Dravidian languages were participants and leaders too, the different groups/leaders/campaigns/publications that made up this movement were predominantly connected to the Tamil language. The history of language-based identity politics in Tamil Nadu has a long trajectory, by no means limited to the twentieth century. The movement and its broad political principles were consolidated from the 1920s onwards, in the work and personhood of E.V. Ramasamy Naicker who was given the title of Periyar, meaning Elder. The term ‘Dravidian Movement’, represented by a few key leaders and their organizations/parties, is a useful way to describe the fundamental linguistic identity formation that has remained at the core of public politics in Tamil Nadu since the late 19th century (Arasu 4).

Periyar’s Dravidar Kazhagam (Dravidian Federation [DK]) is often categorized as a “classically modernist movement” in the sense of distinguishing itself from what is considered a moribund ‘tradition’ (that is, Brahminism) and proposing a new, enlightenment-based philosophy of self-respect (*suyamariyathai*) and rationalism (*pakutharivu*) that would wipe away the irrationalities of caste and gender oppression. This, in addition to the marriage of linguism with long-standing social and economic resentment, and consequences of the recovery of Sangam-period Tamil, created and shaped a potent matrix for political action—but not without drawing on much deeper roots than the colonial period phenomena apparent on the surface (Shulman 215). Kalki’s popular historical novels were written in the context of a cultural renaissance (*marumalarcci*) in modern Tamil Nadu. They are however more reflective of a form of collective memory that Sumathi Ramasamy terms “compensatory,” the aim of which was to demonstrate that “Hindu” or “Indian” civilization had emerged from a “harmonious commingling of the cultures of the Dravidian and the Indo Aryan”. Tamil, it was insisted, “was quite as classical” as Sanskrit, and its literature “is no less ancient, noble, and vast.” Tamil and its literature were thus validated by espousing a parity with Sanskrit, whose value was never questioned. Neither is the divide between “Aryan” and “Dravidian,” seen as distinctive but complementary halves of “India,” nor the legitimacy of the Brahmin (who were often heavily criticised by Dravidianist movements). As can be expected, compensatory classicism was a strategy that was favoured typically, though not always, by devotees who were nominally Brahmin, such as C. Rajagopalachari³ and his disciple Kalki. Their commitment was to a syncretic Indian civilization jointly produced by the “genius” of Tamil and the “genius” of Sanskrit, both of which are necessary and complementary (“Passions” 43).

Kalki's writings are not in accordance with the precepts of the *Tanitamil* (separate Tamil) movement, popularized during his time by prominent literary figures, which was based on linguistic purity and the avoidance of loan words from Sanskrit and English. Kalki, deliberately or incidentally, uses a wide variety of Sanskrit phrases and words in his novels. His centering of the perspective of the Cholas (who supposedly used both Sanskrit and Tamil as court languages) and his positioning of the Pandyas (who are associated with a form of 'purer' Tamil antiquity) as antagonists become significant in this regard.

Kalki's inclusion of nationalist themes contributed to the respectability of the then-maligned novel form and though hostile to the larger schemes of the Dravidian movement, he capitalized on the spirit of Tamil revivalism and cultural pride through his historical novels that are still in print. *Thyagabhoomi* (*Land of Sacrifice*) was his earlier, widely-read and serialized novel that was immediately turned into a film. Both the novel and the film adaptation gained notoriety due to their nationalistic overtones, with a ban being imposed on the film by the colonial government that succeeded in making it all the more popular when the Indian National Congress came to power and censorship of patriotic films was virtually suspended. Kalki while accepting of the liberal aspects of the Gandhian movement was cautious and conservative with regards to the Dravidian movement and was part of a literary wing established by the Congress politician C. Rajagopalachari where "they tried to construct a Tamil tradition which excluded Sangam literature and the medieval scholastic commentaries. *Kambaramayanam* (a classical Tamil retelling of the *Ramayana* by the poet Kambar) was given a central place and Tamil literary tradition constructed around it"⁴ (Venkatachalapathy, "In those days" 96). There was a direct contradiction between the canon-forming impulses of those who favored texts with religious overtones (a group Kalki allied himself with) and those who preferred texts that reflected a more secular or atheistic worldview.

The Popular Historical Novel in Tamil

In all, Kalki wrote three considerably popular historical romances extolling the achievement of the Pallava and Chola dynasties—*Parthiban Kanavu* (Parthiban's Dream) in 1941, *Sivagamiyin Sapatham* (Sivgami's Vow) in 1944, and *Ponniyin Selvan* in 1950. *Ponniyin Selvan* was subsequently published as an epic novel series of five parts titled *Pudhuvellam* (Fresh Floods), *Suzhatrkaatru* (Whirlpool), *Kolaivazh* (Sword of Slaughter), *Manimaganudam* (The Jewelled Crown) and *Thyaga Sikaram* (Epitome of Sacrifice) respectively. With Kalki the contradiction—which emerged in the Tamil cultural sphere on account of the rise of the novel—was more or less resolved in accord with the preferred goals of the middle class:

The 'positive' aspects of popular fiction had been successfully appropriated: thrill, suspense, gripping narrative, pace, unexpected twists, facile prose, sentiment and melodrama were to be found in good measure in the Kalkian variety of fiction. All these were kept within limits, being deployed in controlled doses to excite and consequently deaden taste and imagination, but never to exceed the boundaries of middle-class gentility. (Venkatachalapathy, "The Province of the Book" 96)

Historical novels have often been associated with the formation and establishment of a political identity, whether it be national or regional. The history and popularity of the historical novel in India has been studied by critics like Meenakshi Mukherjee who have highlighted the role of Victorian popular fiction in determining the literary interests of the English-educated nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian. In nineteenth-century Europe, the historical novel also became a dominant memory genre which represented the course of history and helped shape national identities. Similarly in the late nineteenth century India, a new and unprecedented interest in history can be seen to be shared between Indian writers of fiction and their readers ("Realism and Reality" 39). The search for a distinctive regionalism that involves a unique linguistic identity simultaneous with national identity can be identified in the vernacular writings of this time.

Akhila Ramnarayan, in her study titled *Kalki's Avatars: Writing Nation, History, Region and Culture in the Tamil Public Sphere* views the sheer volume of historical fiction generated by Kalki, the enthused response of his audiences, and the spate of historical novels and novelists that followed in his wake as reflecting a strong revivalist turn in the Tamil literary sphere, a response to similar movements across British India but also an indication of a compensatory/contestatory linguistic regionalism. She also lists "recreation of the past, complete erasure of colonial presence, and harking back to a Tamil golden age through romanticized description" as Kalki's trademark (104). Such characterizations indicate that Kalki's work embodies a distinctive form of interventionist literature from the nationalist period that was nevertheless peculiar to the Tamil context. His work was necessarily riddled with contradictions owing to prevailing tensions between nation and region (105). His work is also marked by a desire to situate Tamil history and culture within a framework of significance accorded to global and national historical events. While introducing the consequences of a battle fought in the medieval Tamil country he states, "Many famous battles have changed the course of history, for example, the Battle of Waterloo or The Wars of Panipat, etc. In the same way, the war that was fought near Thirupurampayam changed the course of Tamil history" (Krishnamurthy 131; Vol.2)

The popular novelists like Kalki and Sandilyan who either avoided or rejected the claims of the Dravidian movement often constructed an equally populist vision of the past where benevolent kings dealt fairly with tyrants and usurpers, patronized poets and watched over their subjects. These tales of bravery, treachery, betrayal and sacrifice coincided with the rise of magazines where they could be serialized and offered as entertainment with a romanticized version of the past at a time of cultural transformation and anxiety. Narrative psychologists have pointed out that novels, with their conventionalized plot-lines and highly suggestive myths, provide powerful, often normative models for our own self-narration and interpretation of the past. Historical accuracy is not one of the concerns of such "memory-making" novels and movies; instead, they cater to the public with what is variously termed "authenticity" or "truthfulness". They create images of the past which resonate with cultural memory (Erl 389). The political nexus of film and literature within the state played a significant role in the construction of certain "fictions of memory" that circulated within the cultural landscape of that time period. 'Fictions of memory', according to Brigit Neumann are "the stories that individuals or cultures tell about their past to answer the question "who am I?" or, collectively, "who are we?" These stories are called 'fictions of memory' because, more often than not they turn out to be an imaginative (re)construction of the past in response to current needs (Neumann 333-334). These 'fictions of memory' also proved to be very lucrative as evidenced by the strategy of the movie mogul S.S. Vasan who acquired the flailing *Ananda Vikatan* magazine and revived it with "a successful mix of humour, fiction, and cartoons with a dash of nationalism" (Venkatachalapathy, "The Province of the Book" 95), recruiting Kalki to write his immensely saleable historical novels.

Tamil Cultural Identity and Anxiety

The story of the *Ponniyin Selvan* novels unfolds over the course of an eventful year and follows the adventures of Vallavariyan Vandiya Devan, a picaresque hero, acting as a spy for the swashbuckling Chola princes Aditya Karikalan and Arulmozhivaraman. The latter is the titular 'Ponniyin Selvan' historically known as the legendary Chola king Raja Raja Chola. "Ponni" is one of the names of River Kaveri, another important marker of Tamil cultural identity, and a site of dispute with the neighboring state of Karnataka. The river is described in affectionate terms and sometimes anthropomorphized over the course of the novel, becoming a symbol of Chola, and by extension Tamil, prosperity: "River Ponni! Is there a young woman in our kingdom who has not been elated by your presence? Could there be anyone in this world who is not enamored by your beauty?" (Krishnamurthy 75; Vol. 1). Prince Arulmozhivarman is referred to as "Ponni's son" as he had been rescued in his childhood from drowning by a mysterious woman who many superstitiously believe

to a personification of the river Kaveri. The prince's mythical status as heir to the Chola dynasty, despite being the second son, is thus established through his rebirth by water. Kalki designates the river as a memorative sign throughout the narrative through descriptions such as the following:

Two thousand years ago, the great King Karikala Cholan built the banks of Kaveri River on both the sides. The banks protected the land for many years from river floods. However, when the Pandyas and Pallavas rose to power, the Cholas' star declined. When the kingdom was torn apart by war, there was no one to safeguard the land from flooding river waters. This resulted in floods that changed the geography of the river. (Krishnamurthy 277; Vol. 1)

The river has become, in Bakhtinian terms, a chronotope, a point "in the geography of a community where time and space intersect and fuse" and "where through the agency of historical tales, their intersection is made visible for human contemplation." (Bhaktin 58)

The adventures of the prince's friend and protagonist Vandiya Devan in increasingly extravagant escapades, lead him to uncover royal scandals, conspiracies by rival rulers, and sometimes implausible secrets of parentage and inheritance. Kalki's writing clearly borrowed from the tropes of the sensational Victorian novels, popular among the English-educated Indian bourgeoisie of that time, which typically included mistaken identities, courtly secrets and damsels in distress.

Over the course of his historical novels, Kalki invokes indigenous performance traditions and multilingual, multigenre storytelling practices within the framework of the historical romance to widen its generic scope (Ramnarayan 42). The narrative of *Ponniyin Selvan* intersperses songs from the Tamil oral tradition with verses from saints of the Tamil Bhakti movement. There are also included various descriptions and references to Tamil performance art forms such as *Kuravaikoothu*, *Villupaattu*, *Paraiyattam* etc. Kalki's monarchs are often characterised as flawed but learned men who are patrons of the arts. In fact, the characteristic of a villainous individual in power, in Kalki's historical novels, happens to be their denigration of the arts and artists. In *Ponniyin Selvan*, there is an entire chapter devoted to the ailing king Sundara Chola's patronage of court poets. Kalki frequently mentions and quotes from iconic works of Tamil literature such as the *Tolkapiyam*, *Thirukkural* and *Gilapathikaram* and occasionally from the canon of Sangam poetry. He also signals to the 'greatness' of Tamil tradition through references to the sage Agastiyar, Appar the iconic Saivite Saint of the Bhakti movement, the Vaishnavite Andal and other writers of the devotional and literary traditions of Tamil Nadu. ("The people had a special respect for Sage Agastya and worshipped him as the 'Father of Tamil Language' and had built many temples to honor him." [Krishnamurthy 29; Vol. 3]). There are also innumerable references within the text to local legends as well as tales from the Hindu mythological canon. The Cholas' patronage of Buddhist monasteries is celebrated by Kalki:

Later after many years when Arulmozhivarmar (Raja Raja Cholan) was crowned the king, he would bestow the entire village of Annaimangalam as a tax-free gift to the Choodamani Viharam (a Buddhist monastery) and would inscribe this royal decree as a copper plaque for posterity. Today, these edicts can be seen at Leiden Museum in Holland and therefore they are also known as Leiden Plates. (Krishnamurthy 97; Vol. 5)

However, he seems to regard Islamic influence in the north of India as invasive and corrosive. The 'secularism' of the Cholas within the novels, probably reflecting that of Kalki himself, seems to be circumscribed by a diluted form of religious nationalism.

Kalki's historical research was rigorous despite the obvious sensationalist literary interventions that include doppelgangers, mistaken identity, and disguise. He also at times makes references to famous contemporary figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Joseph Stalin; and Akhila Ramnarayan in her reading of his *Sivagamiyin Sapatham* has pointed out the presentism within the narrative of the text. Kalki's historical novels addressed concerns of his 'present' such as factionalism (within the context of the times during which *Ponniyin Selvan* is set, it is the rivalry between the Vaishnavite and Saivaite factions of Hindu religious worship), feudalism and rural to urban migration.⁵ His stories

also include the popular tragic component of the failed romance and the quest-based tropes of journey and companionship. In the second part of the *Ponniyin Selvan* series there is a rather abrupt shift from the urban landscape to a coastal 'paradise' and the character of the boatwoman Poonkuzhali comes to represent a sort of natural innocence in contrast to the corruption of those in the cities. (Vandiya Devan, upon meeting her, thinks to himself, "Women like her who live close to nature are more beautiful than those who live closeted away from it," [Krishnamurthy 52; Vol. 2]). These elements of the plot can be seen to reflect the anxieties surrounding the changing nature of family, employment and values in post-independence Tamil Nadu. The dying king Sundara Chola comes to represent the traumatic end of a troubled reign that would eventually give way to the 'Golden Age' of medieval Tamil Nadu. Given the uncertainties of his era, Kalki's writings appear to be immersed in themes of revival and regeneration in the face of the political upheavals of his era. There are also mythological and philosophical references to the impermanence of empires and dynasties:

Have we ever heard of any one dynasty ruling endlessly, beyond all bounds of time? Never! Even the illustrious Ishvaku clan, which boasted Lord Rama, died out. The Rettai Mandalathar rose to bring the Chalukya reign to an end. Empires and dynasties do have a habit of rising to tremendous greatness, and crashing to hollow depths; entirely natural, don't you think? There are kingdoms that have ruled for centuries, and disappeared without a trace. (Krishnamurthy 94; Vol. 4)

The entirety of the fifth part of the series has various allusions to the progressive measures taken by the Cholas in the sectors of healthcare, urban planning, water management and flood control, among other things. The history of the achievements of the Chola kings on the battlefield and their 'benevolent' conquests of other parts of the Indian Subcontinent are celebrated through songs and poems rendered by the characters within the novel as well through descriptions by the third-person narrator. However, given Kalki's adherence to Gandhian principles, certain expository passages within the novels do address the moral dilemma of warfare and criticize Prince Aditya Karikalan's construction of a 'Golden Palace' as a sort of vanity project. Kalki also at times addresses the trappings of a monarchical system and describes the forms of corruption that can proliferate among the wealthy and the elite. Nevertheless, he does seem to offer a blueprint for a fairer form of governance through the opinions of his more just and well-meaning characters. The philanthropic mother of Prince Madhuranthakan, Sembian Madevi warns her son against laying claim to the throne against the wishes of his deceased father, the reluctant king Gandaradithar who "hated politics, schemes, and intrigues." She further recalls her husband posing the following question, "A common thief steals gold from other people and in the same manner the King tries to covet lands from other Kingdoms. What's the difference between the King and the thief?" (Krishnamurthy 174; Vol. 4)

According to Sumathi Ramaswamy, the nostalgia for ancient Sangam poems that was so endemic in devotional circles was in Tamil Nadu, at the turn of the twentieth century, can be attributed to "the attrition and disappearance of royal courts and religious centers of learning, the redirection of funds towards "useful" and "modern" forms of knowledge, the rise of new bourgeois forms of consumption, and a colonial state indifferent to the promotion of India's languages and literatures"—all these contributed "to the generalised feeling that things were no longer as they were in the past." ("Passions" 220) This generalised feeling of change and resistance to it was especially manifest in the reaction to the transformations in traditional gender roles and the problematization of caste hierarchy.

Representation of Gender and Caste

A crucial aspect of this negotiation of the past in relation to the present was the 'woman question'—the construction of the ideal Indian woman. Despite the political participation of women in the Independence movement and Periyar's anti-caste activism, there was a lack of gender perspective and the absence of women (beyond the tokenistic) within the public political sphere in post-Independence Tamil Nadu. Kalki was incidentally known for creating feisty, outspoken women charac-

ters and those in *Ponniyin Selvan* seem to arguably enjoy more autonomy as a whole than the women of Kalki's own time probably did.

However, Kalki's women rarely transgress the limits of bourgeois morality and frequently fall into gendered dichotomies of 'virtuous' and 'immoral'. The rather conservative nationalist construction of women co-existed with reformist impulses in the time of high nationalism. Simultaneously, the Indian and Tamil woman in popular imagination had contradictory qualities of bravery and timidity, eloquence and reticence, boldness and reserve, while never questioning her patriarchal positioning. The feud between Nandhini, the mysteriously beautiful young wife of the aged chief military advisor of the king and Kundavai, the intelligent and tactical princess, represents the power struggles of women within distinguished households that impact political outcomes, despite being patronizingly dismissed as 'women's squabbles.'

Though Kalki made more effort than other contemporaries towards a more nuanced portrayal, the women who are covertly praised within the narrative are those who uphold *karpū*, or what can be loosely translated as a 'Tamil woman's chastity'. The emphasis on women's chastity has always interestingly co-existed within the 'progressive' politics of Tamil nationalist movements despite occasionally being contested by rationalists like Periyar. Earlier iterations of the Dravidian Movement, from the 1920s to the 1940s, were primarily represented by the South Indian Liberal Federation (commonly referred to as the Justice Party, after the party's mouthpiece journal called *Justice*) and the Self-Respect Movement. Both had Periyar's leadership along with a large group of vibrant thinkers, writers and orators—many of whom were women. These political groups soon became overshadowed by the growth of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Dravidian Progress Federation) or the DMK, from the 1940s onwards. The dawn of the DMK coincided with the dwindling participation of women in public politics and a dilution of radical critique of casteism. This is not to suggest that Kalki's portrayal deliberately coincided with the changing position of women or Dalits in the Dravidian movement as Kalki himself was not in accordance with many of its goals. Rather, this is indicative of the way in which writers or movements that have a progressive veneer often curb the radical potential of women or women characters whose realities are relegated to the fringes of a revolution. The literary figures from classical texts celebrated by the Dravidian movement are evidence of this trend. For instance, the virtuous wife Kannagi from the epic *Cilappathikaram*⁶ is often invoked as a cultural marker of chaste Tamil womanhood and sometimes to signify the destructive potential of a righteous woman's rage. Periyar considered her a regressive cultural icon and condemned the veneration of Kannagi as sexist and casteist (given that only Brahmins are spared her wrath). However, the Dravidian movement continues to uphold Kannagi as a key representative of Tamil womanhood.

The models of masculinity represented in the *Ponniyin Selvan* novels correspond to the patterns adopted by Bengali writers such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee who were eager to create more traditionally macho men in their fiction, in response to the stereotype of the 'effete' Bengali Babu of the colonialist construction (sometimes also reflected in the characterization of male protagonists in the works of writers like Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay); and thereby set their stories in the medieval past of warrior heroes and kings. (Mukherjee, "Early Novels" xv)

The emergence of the novel in India coincided with a new and unprecedented interest in history and historiography in the nineteenth century. Occasional convergences between the discourses of history and fiction can be seen in the past-based novels poised between two opposing teleologies of history—one that glorified the past as the lost golden age and the other influenced by Enlightenment rationalism that put its faith in 'progress', envisaging a future when society might achieve a higher level of equality or justice (xvii). Bengali writers who are often studied as representative novelists of this period strove to reconcile the requisites of 'progressive' enlightened masculinity with the counter-requisite of the valorous sword-fighting hero. In the Tamil milieu, Kalki's attempt at reconciling these seemingly disparate characteristics produces characters such as Vandiya Devan and

Arulmozhiarman who are willing to accept the counsel of older women, revere more powerful women and advocate for peaceful means of conflict-resolution. But they also rescue damsels-in-distress, lead armies and at times banter in a casually misogynist way about the 'wiles of women'. War seems to be romanticized when it is 'good' men like Arulmozhiarman leading the charge.

My blood and flesh remind me every day that I belong to the dynasty from which Emperor Sibi and Manu Needhi Cholan were born. They remind me to forsake wealth and comfort and help people. I also have ancestors like Vijayalaya Chola and Karikala Vallavan who ask me to pick up my sword, gather my army, go on conquests, and find glory in war and expanding the empire. (Krishnamurthy 33; Vol. 3)

The treatment of caste within the novel is similarly establishmentarian rather than subversive. While Kalki embraced the Gandhian rhetoric of anti-casteism and condemned this form of discrimination in his novels of social realism, his popular works of historical fiction rarely questioned hierarchy and rather naturalized it. The dialogues of the upper-caste characters often include casteist slurs which while arguably realistic, are not subverted or problematized anywhere within the framework of the novels. Similar to the trope of the valiant Rajput warrior in the fiction of the Bengali and other contemporary North Indian historical novelists, the valor of Kalki's heroes is tied to the 'superior' caste or clan that they were born into. Vandiya Devan, in particular, is constantly exalted as Vanarkulathu Veeran which translates to 'Warrior of the Vanar clan', with his prowess attributed the caste he was born into. As he proclaims to the soldiers who try to stop him entering a fortress: "You dare to ask 'me' who I am? I am Vallavareyan, Vandiya Devan of the Vanar Clan in Thiruvallam. Once upon a time, soldiers like you, proudly carved the names of my ancestors on their chests." (Krishnamurthy 35; Vol.1) This superficial approach to caste parallels the limitations of Dravidian promises for Tamil self-affirmation and its oftentimes shallow critique of caste hegemony.

Modernity, Nostalgia and Historical Fiction

Svetlana Boym's examination of nostalgia in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* characterizes it as not merely an individual sickness but a symptom of an age, a historical emotion which is not necessarily opposed to modernity and individual responsibility, and is rather coeval with it. She observes that outbreaks of nostalgia often follow revolutions, as revolutions were accompanied by political and cultural manifestations of longing. Boym believes that "the object of romantic nostalgia must be beyond the present space of experience, somewhere in the twilight of the past or on the island of utopia where time has happily stopped, as on an antique clock." (Boym 25) This contradictory modernist impulse can be examined in the context of the delineation of statehood and linguistic identity in Tamil Nadu that led to revivals of traditional literary forms set in a near-mythical past. With the typical dramatic license available to a popular historical novelist Kalki enlarges upon the myth of an already legendary ruler, perhaps most famous for his religious patronage. Though Arulmozhiarman is a king in the not-so-distant past with a well-documented reign, Kalki in his telling elevates him to the status of King Arthur of the English legends. *Ponniyin Selvan* continues to have historical and symbolic resonance because of its association with the royal exploits of Tamil kings and with the literary achievements of the poets whom they patronized.

Nostalgia could be a framework to explain the unprecedented interest in the 2022 adaption of *Ponniyin Selvan* created among the Tamil audience, particularly among those of the older generation, who would have either read the text during its initial run or in its subsequent editions. The two-part film adaptation of the series revived discussions of Tamil heritage and pride in popular media that the books had originally generated over seventy years ago. Tamil devotees have often idealized kingship in their historical ruminations, even as they demand modern democratic forms of rule in the political realm. There has not been much popular interrogation of this preoccupation with a monarchical past or the contribution of the text to the overall project of Tamil devotion in Kalki's

own time. In fact, Kalki faced much more criticism and derision from his contemporaries than he does in the present. A powerful sense of Tamil pride and autonomy continues to be the dominant feature of the political culture of the Tamil region to this day and this sensibility is “kept alive by the circulation of memories about a place and a time when Tamils had been in power and when Tamil speakers had been ruled by their own.” (Ramaswamy, “Fabulous Geographies” 130)

A number of early novels in the immediate pre-independence and post-independence years depicted contemporary conditions in what seemed like a realistic mode, reflecting current concerns and speculating on possible resolutions—a prime example of this trend is the works of the Tamil modernist writer Pudumaipittan who was a harsh critic of what he perceived to be Kalki’s ‘unrealistic’ writing. But an equal number or more novels were set either in the historical past or in a remote unspecified era of romance. Kalki somehow straddled both these modes of writing; in his sentimental novels of ‘social realism’ he interrogated nationalism and social inequality, and his historical novels in their description of past glory also indirectly addressed the broader issues concerning post-independence Tamil political identity. *Ponniyin Selvan*, written at a time of seismic changes in modern Tamil Nadu, is a collective text that at close reading is revealed to contain cultural anxieties, ambivalence towards modernity and the revivalist spirit that characterized immediate pre- and post-independence Tamil Nadu, in a populist narrative format. Kalki’s compensatory approach to antiquity and cultural memory is indicative of the author’s own political convictions and what was possibly the populist bourgeoisie zeitgeist as well. The role of the historical novel that is widely circulated within a given magazine culture as a repository of mainstream images of the past and the present is reinforced by the iconic status accorded to some of these novels, be they critically acclaimed or not. Kalki’s series of historical novels, particularly *Ponniyin Selvan*, ensured that historical fiction became the genre through which post-independence anxieties about language, tradition and regional identity were addressed within popular Tamil print culture.

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Notes

¹ For a detailed account of the history of modern Tamil publishing, see A.R.Venkatachalapathy, *The Province of the Book: Scholars, Scribblers and Scribes in Colonial Tamilnadu* (2012).

² Sangam literature, historically known as ‘the poetry of the noble ones’ connotes ancient Tamil literature and is the earliest known literature of South India. The Tamil tradition and legends link it to three literary gatherings around Madurai and Kapâm*apuram (Pandyan capitals): the first over 4,440 years, the second over 3,700 years, and the third over 1,850 years before the start of the common era. Scholars consider this Tamil tradition-based chronology as ahistorical and mythical. Most scholars suggest the historical Sangam literature era spanned from c. 300 BCE to 300 CE, while others variously place this early classical Tamil literature period a bit later and more narrowly but all before 300 CE.

³ C.Rajagopalachari (10 December 1878 – 25 December 1972), popularly known as Rajaji, was an Indian statesman, writer, lawyer, and independence activist from Tamil Nadu. Rajagopalachari was the last Governor-General of India, as India became a republic in 1950. He also served as leader of the Indian National Congress, Premier of the Madras Presidency, Governor of West Bengal, Minister for Home Affairs of the Indian Union and Chief Minister of Madras State.

⁴ The egalitarian communal life depicted in Sangam literature, seen to be untainted by a Brahminical religion, and a culture based on sedentary life fed into Dravidian identity politics and provided an alternative worldview to that of a Vedic age constructed by the Orientalists.

- ⁵ This is exemplified by the scores of people in the novels who move from villages to the cities of Tanjore and Pazhayarai to set up shops and other aspirational ventures. Kalki also pays tribute to the now lost cultural capital of Pazhayarai, once an important city of the Chola empire, partly due to migration to Tanjore. Kalki quotes from poets, who lived much after the reign of Sundara Chola and his progeny, to lament this loss.
- ⁶ *Cilappatikāram* ("the Tale of an Anklet") is the earliest Tamil epic. It is a tragic love story of an ordinary couple, Kannaki and her husband Kovalan. *Cilappatikāram* has roots in the Tamil bardic tradition, as Kannaki and other characters of the story are mentioned or alluded to in Sangam literature such as the *Narīṇai* and later texts such as the *Kovalam Katai*. It is attributed to a prince-turned-monk Iḷaṅkō Aṭṭaḷ, and was probably composed in the 5th or 6th century CE.

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Book Reviews

A PHILOSOPHY OF VISUAL METAPHOR IN CONTEMPORARY ART. By Mark Staff Brandl. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. 240 pp.

The word “metaphor” has a somewhat antagonistic status among many students of literature and art history. From my experience, describing a work as “metaphorical” tends to change the atmosphere in a classroom, imbuing it with a sense of hesitation. There is something about saying that a visual or textual work contains metaphors that seems to invite a correlation to inaccessibility, even a certain level of mystery, in the minds of some, perpetuating the idea that the arts are a closed community open only to a select few who are educated enough or talented enough to develop the skillset required.

Mark Staff Brandl’s *A Philosophy of Visual Metaphor in Contemporary Art* works to disrupt this very definition of the term. From the onset, Brandl defines metaphor as something that is open, fluid, opposing a linear correlation between the method of expression and the ideas being expressed: “I claim that artworks are objects created for multiple interpretations, wherein the form and the content are in extricably interwoven, each mirroring the other in its own terms” (49). The key term introduced by Brandl is visual metaphor, which he distinguishes from verbal metaphor by emphasizing that they are the product of a complex system of reception of tropes, another key term of the book that refers to “figurative language in general” (12). These tropes and the ideas they contain are then taken in, by artists and viewers alike, and synthesized into something different, a new arrangement of tropes that is presented in visual form, hence visual metaphor.

Where the introduction and first chapter are dedicated to setting up Brandl’s argument, chapter two gives the reader a glimpse into the bigger, practical stakes of the book. Here, Brandl discusses the matter of immediacy to visual metaphor, the moment of recognition always intentional but not always, or at least not necessarily, conscious. Brandl also emphasizes the multivalence of visual metaphors, arguing that it is possible to hold on to the associations evoked by an artwork without converting it to a textual equivalent. Although he does not use the term, affect theory hangs strongly over this chapter and the next. The association is made all the more palpable by the brief mention of James Elkins’ *Pictures and Tears* in chapter three, a book that contemplates why some works of art have such a strong emotional impact on viewers and discusses the highly debated Stendhal Syndrome. Brandl draws attention to a sense of inherent knowingness that everyone is capable of when looking at art, to the point where the knowledge becomes instinctive and transfers over into the realm of sensation. Brandl encourages his reader to tap into this feeling and well of affective knowledge in the third chapter. Taking the stereotypical proclamation that art “responds to reality”, Brandl complicates it by arguing that reality is lived experience, which makes it a distinctly flexible concept.

If these first four sections of the book can be labelled as a conversation about contemporary art’s function and what it means to see a work of art, then the following four chapters can be grouped together as a discussion on what it means to see a work of art. These are not terms nor distinctions Brandl puts forth in his book but rather a way I came to think of his discussion the further into the reeds I got. Seeing, in *A Philosophy of Visual Metaphor in Contemporary Art*, involves considering the artist and the process as much as the final product, to recognize that this is, in itself, another complex system. After introducing the argument that visual metaphor has a syntax, which consists of principles and elements of design—line, shape, colour, etc.—Brandl dedicates chapter five to intro-

ducing the concept of “metaphor(m)”. Describing it as “the theory of central visual trope” (93), Brandl describes it as seeing a work of art as simultaneously an object, a process, a material, and a form. One of the most significant effects of this term is that it works against the compartmentalization that sometimes occurs within art history and comparative literature, where some scholars may choose to focus on a biographical approach of the artist and center the process, while others take more of a close reading approach, centering the object and breaking it down according to the preferred methodology, from social history to psychoanalysis. This is where the discussion in chapter six goes as well, with chapter seven serving as an example in application. Focusing on two case studies—Charles Baetschi’s “Colour Unit 24.1” (1998) and Leonard Bullock’s “Seinpost” (2001–2002)—Brandl applies his own methodology to demonstrate a close and engaged form of formal looking that recognizes that an artist’s technique and creative self-expression can co-exist with their desire to establish connections to other philosophical concepts or artistic schools through their work.

I gravitated the most to the last third of the book, beginning with Brandl’s “metaphor(m)”. In this section, Brandl’s thoughts take on a practical dimension while cultivating the conviction that art is living, rather than purely material and imbued with inherent meanings. In the final chapter, Brandl proposes thinking of art history as one large visual metaphor, to move away from the idea of a strict, linear timeline. One of the main benefits of this, Brandl suggests, is that it puts artists, not academics, first. After a necessary reminder that art historical narratives are constructs that are not universal, Brandl presents eight prominent timelines within art history and nine timelines of sequential art, a topic he admits to having strong personal engagement. Brandl’s own contribution to the topic is to propose the braid timeline because of the way it allows for parallels across cultures and decenters the cause-and-effect model.

Brandl’s approach makes *A Philosophy of Visual Metaphor in Contemporary Art* a valuable teaching tool. Rather than using it as a straightforward textbook, where students are expected to read, remember, and regurgitate an author’s ideas in an exam or some other written assignment, Brandl’s arguments invite discussion and further examples beyond those he selects himself. The comics at the beginning of each chapter are the biggest evidence of this. *A Philosophy of Visual Metaphor in Contemporary Art* is not a gatekeeping book. Although there is a benefit to being familiar with Deconstructivism and the different historiographic approaches within art history, Brandl’s goal is always to clarify rather than obstruct. If metaphors, according to cognitive theory, “are embodied, that is, that mental concepts are constructed tropically out of bodily experiences” (6), then relationality becomes as viable an approach to take when viewing art as it is when creating it.

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THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO BEAUTY POLITICS (Paperback). By Maxine Leeds Craig (Ed.). UK: Routledge, 2023. 404 pp.

The editor, Maxine Leeds Craig, compiled, arranged, and offered the articles in this book to explore how beauty impacts issues and people in social and political ways. Even though some of the topics and concepts have a longer history, in *The Routledge Companion to Beauty Politics*, they are often situated in current practices and contexts, for example on social media and other realms. In addition to the topics, another value of this book is the breadth of locations around the world. Rather than talking about abstract concepts or issues, the authors situate them in specific cultures, including Japan, Sudan, and Turkey. And they often place these issues and concepts within specific practical contexts, such as salons, retail stores, and tattoo parlors.

The thirty-six chapters in this volume offer an impressive range of cultures, contexts, and concepts that are not often addressed in most philosophical anthologies pertaining to aesthetics. Many of the authors in this volume come from disciplines, like sociology or gender studies, illustrating the desperate need for interdisciplinary collaborations and dialogue, rather than the more common academic feature of being insular. Anyone interested in current ways that beauty (and aesthetics) affects people will greatly benefit from this book. Divided into six sections, the book addresses issues in politics of beauty, definitions of beauty, activism, body work, labor, and lifecourse. It is not possible to discuss each of the essays, so I will provide an overview of each of these sections.

The first section theorizing beauty politics, after the introduction, begins with Rosalind Gill's "Neoliberal Beauty," which Maxine Leeds Craig describes as setting the stage for much of what follows in the book. Gill writes, "Most work on neoliberalism assumes a generic human subject." (10) This book exemplifies how to avoid that by situating the discussions within specific situations, often with statements from those directly involved. In an essay on class, Helen Wood distinguishes between the ideal body and the grotesque, which falls short of the ideal. Beyond neoliberalism and class, the remaining essays of this section approach beauty from feminism, philosophy, and anti-racism. The goal is to situate some of the discussion about beauty beyond the traditional categories, largely dominated by men.

Despite the second section being called "Competing Definitions of Beauty," the authors of these essays avoid offering a universal definition of beauty. Einav Rabinovitch-Fox explores the development of beauty in consumer culture in the 20th century. She writes: "Consumer culture thus both shaped definitions of beauty and provided the means to challenge these same definitions." (65) This reciprocal idea of shaping and challenging seems to appear, even implicitly, in many of the chapters in this book, showing that simple or reductionist accounts of beauty will not work. Beauty is more complicated. Colorism and body-size, for instance, are both issues that have driven reactions to redefine beauty. Subcultures like cosplay provide microcosms of how beauty standards infiltrate and try to control how people appear. Therefore, competing definitions of beauty are needed to expand our overall understanding of beauty.

Dostoevsky wrote: "Beauty will save the world." And the authors of the chapters in the third section discuss activism and social change. This section provides insights into disability aesthetics, blackfishing, fat activism, Black hair, and more. Some bodies have been viewed negatively historically and still today. How could we begin to overcome the oppressive aesthetic with a more inclusive (and less hostile) aesthetic? Different beauty standards compete for dominance in a culture, so the standards may change but still reflect the opinions of those with more power and influence. This makes Carla Pfeffer, who authored the chapter "Fat Activism and Beauty Politics," wonder why we even strive for beauty as some sort of achievement in the first place.

Body Work comprises the fourth section. Hair removal, orthodontics, botox, and plastic surgery are all examples of work done on the body to conform to a particular standard. Many of the standards derive from white bodies as they are portrayed in various media and from past colonialist influence. But in an article about beauty in Turkey, Claudia Liebelt claims that it's a mistake to assume all beauty standards come from western colonialism. The influence of the West had an effect, but Liebelt argues that religion and culture in Turkey also influenced beauty culture. Even with our criticisms, we realize that there's more nuance than we might comprehend, especially at first glance.

In the fifth section on "Beauty and Labor," the authors discuss modeling, tattooers, beauty pageants, and retail work. Modeling has begun to be more accepting of body types other than the ultra thin and tall, but fashion models are still not the ones in control. Fashion tastemakers decide which models to use. In another context, tattoo artists spend hours with their patrons. While their expertise is their art, those in the chairs getting the tattoos often demand a large amount of emotional labor from the artist. In retail work, the employees often receive a discount to purchase clothes from their store. In other words, the employees model the clothing one can purchase, which leads to some

selective hiring practices. People of certain body types might be able to work in the back, but those facing the customers must fit a particular look. To fulfill people's aesthetic needs, whole industries of laborers use their skills and emotions to advance people's commitments to their aesthetic desires.

The final section of this book addresses beauty and the lifecourse. At both ends of life, especially for women, younger and older people face different sets of difficulties. Young girls in beauty pageants are made to look much older than their actual ages, and older women are particularly disadvantaged in the workplace, healthcare, and other interactions. People cannot simply be their age, they are always nudged to present themselves at different stages of life, if they want recognition.

Hopefully this all too brief overview highlights the breadth this volume offers. In fact, the only real criticism of the book as a whole is that it might explore too many topics at the expense of depth for some of them. But the chapter bibliographies indicate where you can go to gain more depth on any of the topics. This book is an essential resource for anyone interested in how beauty and political contexts influence each other. Most companions to aesthetics written by philosophers focus more on ideas, and there is nothing in itself wrong with that. But this volume, while not without theory, tends to situate ideas into the specific contexts that those ideas impact. So this book complements those philosophical anthologies exemplifying the way that theory and practice ought to complement each other.

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THREE ENCOUNTERS: HEIDEGGER, ARENDT, DERRIDA. By David Farrell Krell. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2023. 360 pp.

It is commonplace for students of literature to be chastised for their curiosity about the authors they are expected to study. Any biographical reference is supposed to interfere with the objective, unbiased appreciation of the text. The tragedy is that with years and years of training in close reading and practical criticism – which is perhaps necessary for beginners to understand as stepping stones to explorations of methods of literary criticism – young scholars come to internalise the idea that attempting to know the person behind the text is forbidden: indeed, the author is even dead!

Thankfully, ever since literary critique has come to be more and more open to influences from philosophy, the process of getting to know the author has acquired a different nuance. In *Three Encounters: Heidegger, Arendt, Derrida*, philosopher and translator David Farrell Krell demonstrates that philosophers are people and their personal lives provide insights into their work as well. Krell's book is a memoir that is also a reflection on philosophy in general as well as on the three philosophers mentioned in the title. In documenting his personal interactions with three of the great philosophers of the twentieth century (with Derrida overflowing into the twenty-first one too), Krell shows that his good fortune of having worked with these philosophers in different capacities – as translator, peer, interlocutor – is an extension of his philosophizing. The anecdotes, letters exchanged, and diary entries, along with other marginalia put together, speak of the three figures in terms of tenderness.

One episode Krell narrates relates to Derrida's last note that his son read out at Derrida's funeral: "Smile on me as I will have smiled on you up to the end. Always prefer life and do not cease to affirm survival. . . . I love you and I smile on you from wherever I am" (319). In narrating many such experiences, Krell reminds scholars and enthusiasts of philosophy that philosophy is nothing if it is not about emotion, especially love. Elsewhere, Krell observes, "Sometimes I believe that the only honest biography or autobiography would consist solely of accounts of the subject's dream life and love life, letting all the rest go. Whether one loves, how one loves, whom one loves, and about what

one dreams when aching for love—what could be more significant for a life than that?” (300). It is this purpose or gaze of love that Krell’s recollections of time spent with Heidegger, Arendt, and Derrida – meeting or reading – make them come alive as human beings and not as people who thought in sad or boring or profound sounding concepts.

While the book is likely to be relished more by those who are deeply familiar with the work of the three philosophers, it might also serve as a good introduction to those struggling with access to their works, for with Krell, one gets to know them in relation to one another. For instance, Heidegger emerges as someone who is deeply concerned with thinking, does not say much about Eros, or loving, and Arendt is aware of his limitation, while Derrida is the one who lets thinking and loving shape each other. Another instance of the relationship-making that readers can look forward to in the book is Krell’s observation that while Derrida found Heidegger’s thought as “epoch-making” and “epoch-ending”, he (Derrida) also challenged “the very sense of ‘epochality’” as evident in Heidegger (325).

Through his narration of and commentary on such moments, Krell humanises his subjects to an extent that the reader is left with a richer understanding of philosophy as not something abstract and stuck in convoluted, jargonised phrasing, something that is a puzzle to solve. On the contrary, one is left with the idea that philosophy is nothing if it is not about being a good human being. In one of the most moving excerpts of the book, a rare one in which Krell’s own personality speaks explicitly about what all the recollecting and a life spent on dwelling in philosophy has taught him, and while speaking of generosity as a pre-requisite for writing, he says:

My “indefensible idea” is that an inconsiderate person *cannot* write a book that is worth reading. Indefensible! many will cry, because think of all the famous writers who, according to all reports, were entirely unpleasant characters, extremely difficult persons, obstreperous, bitter, and caustic curmudgeons. I accept the reproof. But I have decided that I will drive a taxi or plant potatoes or do any number of things if being a scholar means that I must give the books of the ungenerous a chance. There is doubtless some seedy, sentimental humanism at the bottom of my refusal, the idea that at least in the “humanities” there has to be a modicum of the humane. If that idea does turn out to be indefensible, I will renew my chauffeur’s license, I will fetch my pick and shovel. (326)

Krell makes such assertions about the relationship between the human and his/her written word so easily because enjoys the privilege of being privy to the processes of the translation of these philosophers. For instance, he mentions that when translating Derrida’s work *Carte postale*, translator Alan Bass found it tough to translate the question “Est-ce taire un nom?”. It could be “Is silence a name?” or “Is ‘to be silent’ a name?” The problem is further complicated by the fact that “Est-ce taire” is homophonic with the name Esther, the Biblical character, or a “religious” name that cannot be easily revealed and is therefore evocative of the silence in question.

Derrida’s idea of heterothanatology, the genre or mode of thought that interweaves biography and autobiography – which Krell adapts to autoheterobiothanatology – is the genre that Krell’s *Three Encounters* should be located in. The personal lives discussed are exemplify the fact that Krell has cared for the lives of the philosophers, rather than mere ideas. Because this interest in people is so relatable, it has its simple moments that might be mistaken for being pulled out of any “popular” self help or philosophy book. The wisdom, for instance, in Krell’s suggestion that “[o]ld age yields to the foolishness that forgives the foolishness of youth” (323) might be a banal observation about how age changes oneself but it is also a reminder of the fact that such wisdom is the core of all philosophy. Krell’s fondness for the philosophy heroes does not shy away from touching upon controversial, even scandalous, aspects of their lives; it enhances the meaning of these aspects, and broadens one’s way of looking at life and ideas. It also teaches one that if one brings so much care for every subject one writes about, it transforms memoir into philosophy for philosophy is everywhere, if one has the eye for it.

PUNJABI CENTURIES: TRACING HISTORIES OF PUNJAB. By Anshu Malhotra. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2024. 391 pp.

On first thoughts, Anshu Malhotra's edited volume *Punjabi Centuries* is an odd title to review for a publication dedicated to comparative literature and aesthetics: it is not invested in any aesthetic or formal frameworks for understanding texts. Indeed, there are no texts in the conventional sense of the term. Instead, it brings together different perspectives on history of Punjab from print culture, song and performance in the Punjabi diaspora, sacred spaces, progressive movement in literature, controversial case of sexual harassment, status of music in pre-independence period Lahore, and the appropriation of a Sikh king's fight for sacred space as political victory. These questions fall across many disciplinary investigations: sociology, history, political science, and anthropology, for instance. However, where the book becomes relevant for the readers of this Journal is the approach it can open up for examining a lot of projects in aesthetics, especially in the postcolonial contexts. In order to do justice to spelling out this approach as a takeaway for the readers, this review shall refrain from summarising every chapter, and, instead, focus on only a couple of chapters that make for an interesting reading for the implications they hold for the role of art and performance in postcolonial imagination today, especially in South Asia.

One must begin with the penultimate chapter "Commemorating Baghel Singh's 'Conquest' of Delhi: The Fateh Diwas" by Kanika Singh. Singh deals with the history of a celebration of Fateh Diwas in March 2014 at Red Fort. The grand ceremony was meant to honour the memory of the hoisting of the Sikh flag Nishan Sahib at Red Fort by Sikh military commander Baghel Singh in 1783, challenging the supremacy of the Mughal empire. As historical accounts have it, he relented when the Mughals agreed to build gurudwaras in the region, as a way of paying a tribute to the Sikh religion and its gurus. However, the calendar art that represents the general's exploits as 'historical paintings' has a different story to tell, which, in turn, needs to be seen in the nineteenth century account written by Sikh historian Ratan Singh Bhangu about the episode. His text was written in terms of asserting Sikh kingdom as legitimate and sovereign, and not as subordinate to the Mughal empire. Over a period of time, the historical details seem to have been overwhelmed by the narrative of military conquest over the Mughals, while it alienates Muslims as oppressive tyrants and foreigners or invaders and invokes a sense of pride in Indian identity. The claim by the DSGMC (Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee) around the historical episode has dangerous consequences for communal harmony in the contemporary times:

[T]he DSGMC press release for the Fateh Diwas celebrations in 2015 claimed that Baghel Singh's conquest 'paved war for Independence' The DSGMC therefore demanded that the Indian government announce the 'conquest of Lal Qila by the Sikh forces in 1783 as a national event celebrated annually' This particular demand is a claim for a place – a pride of place – in the larger narrative of Indian history. In fact, Sikh leaders frequently like to point out that the Sikhs' role in Indian history has been neglected. As the Fateh Diwas makes a claim for the Sikhs' place in Indian history, it also reinforces the broader right-wing propaganda of Mughals being considered foreigners, whose rule was characterised by the tyranny and oppression of other religious groups. (321)

While reading Singh's narrative of Fateh Diwas into the open for discussion, one cannot help but think about the need for texts in popular/visual culture to be situated in the wider questions of history of colonisation and the partition. Texts partake of a popular imagination, constitute it, while also moulding it for a different present. The way they clash with history, interpret or appropriate it to divisive agendas call for imagining ways of comparison with, not just other texts, but with other forms of representation such as the historical accounts, and performance and celebrations in the present. Aesthetics, thus, finds an enriching, wider scope for inquiry.

The other chapter in the book that has strong implications for aesthetics is Nicole Ranganath's "Soundscapes of the Self: Music and Identity Assertion among Diasporic Punjabi Sikh Women in California, 1950s–2000s". In the chapter, Ranganath documents the songwriting/composition and performance by two Punjabi women in California, Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara and Harbans Kaur Panu who sing of the landscape of the Punjab and their lives in the US.

This is the first study exploring autobiographical songs composed by the first generation of South Asian American women. The songs offer rare insights into women's interior emotional lives – into their loneliness, sorrows, desires and aspirations. Music represents a particularly powerful vehicle for understanding the continuities and disjunctures in transnational cultural flows, which I refer to as 'soundscapes' (aural cultural flows) The discovery of these songs is especially valuable given that women's lives remain largely neglected in South Asia diaspora studies. Equally important is the fact that women barely exist in the public record of early South Asian migration to North America. Moreover, elderly Punjabi women are generally relegated to the private sphere of the home, rarely garnering public attention within the community and in the border American society. The fact that *bibian* (elderly women) composed poetry will come as a surprise to many in the local Punjabi community. (81)

The songs that Ranganath foregrounds as texts, or as an oeuvre in themselves, reveal the importance of anchoring that the context of the diaspora provides to South Asian fashioning in North America. While countless scholars working in diaspora studies have been looking at fiction and other genres from various perspectives of identity and hybridity and so on, Ranganath's choice of the composition of the two women (among several others in her larger work) reveals that aesthetics has a lot to do with the everyday aspects of life, not easily accessible as texts. The songs, evocative of the folk text of Hir, show fascinating continuities and adaptational possibilities within South Asian cultural heritage as remembered by different genders.

As the above glimpses into the book hopefully have shown, *Punjabi Centuries* offers different perspectives of history and politics that can be meaningfully engaged with by postcolonial scholars researching aesthetics in South Asia, alerting them to newer questions and connections across disciplines.

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DISCOVERING INDIAN PHILOSOPHY: AN INTRODUCTION TO HINDU, JAIN AND BUDDHIST THOUGHT. By Jeffrey D. Long. London, New York and Dublin: Bloomsbury, 2024. 236 pp.

What must one look for in an introduction to Indian philosophy? Is it an accessible account of often overlapping traditions? Or is it a coherent account of contradictions within one tradition? Is it an accurate or neat rendering of different schools of thought and their leaders on a chronological scale? Or is it a narration that speaks to how the different worldviews stand in contemporary, postcolonial practices today? Is it a concern for the historical and socio-political contexts that different philosophies emerged? Or is it the focus on the timeless and the essential aspects of the various forms of thought?

It is with these questions that one approaches Jeffrey D. Long's *Discovering Indian Philosophy*. The book works brilliantly at various levels: given the complex and vast nature of the subject, it manages to touch upon main philosophies and philosophers, the network of thoughts they draw from, their principles, as well as their contestations. Organised along the lines of Hinduism, the systems that challenged it Jainism, Buddhism, and innovations within Hinduism (such as the Shastras, the epics, the Vedanta, the Tantra, and modern, colonial era interventions such as those by Ramakrishna),

Long's book makes for an intense reading that cannot be read from start to finish. Its slimness is deceptive for every subsection within every chapter is a volume of its own that needs to be read closely in conjunction with other relevant sections in the book.

While the overviews of different aspects of Indian philosophy exist elsewhere, it is Long's approach that sets this book apart. Conventionally, such volumes are organised by tradition or by topic but Long uses the approach of storytelling and conversation to let the ideas emerge as they interact with each other. While explaining his own approach, Long writes:

A good image for Indian philosophy as a whole is, indeed, that of a conversation that has been going on for over three thousand years I have found . . . that the most natural and effective way for me to approach Indian philosophy is as a story: to see this tradition as the millennia-old conversation that it is, with each system and tradition flowing into and affecting the others, each giving its particular insight into questions like the nature of being, knowledge and morality. Rather than presenting a list of either traditions or topics, I have endeavoured to summarize this conversation, as I understand it. I hope I have done so clearly and in a way which gives insight, with a minimum of confusion, while also conveying a sense of the complexity of the material involved. (11)

This storytelling approach comes in handy in various ways. Those approaching Indian philosophy for the first time find a lot to connect to Western philosophy. Here, he explains the connections between religion and yoga, a connection not an easy or a natural one to make for someone who does not have access to notions of religion outside the West:

The word *yoga* itself is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root *yuj*, meaning 'yoke'. The aim of yoga is to 'yoke' the mind to its true nature or source. The practice of meditation – also strongly associated with contemporary yoga – thus comes to mind when one reflects on the meaning of this term. What, precisely, this practice refers to, though – what it means in pragmatic terms to practice yoga – is not thus illuminated. Does it refer to a system of postures, to meditation, to both of these together, or to something else?

Interestingly, the root meaning of yoga as being yoked or tied back to one's true nature or source is not unlike the root meaning of *religion*. The Latin *religio* is derived from *religare*, which means something like 'to yoke' or 'to tie back' to one's source, to one's higher reality. Yoga and religion are thus closely connected in their meanings. (160)

One can find many examples of this sense-making: the juxtaposition of the Buddha and Rene Descartes is another interesting example of Long's method: he does not introduce Indian philosophy; he helps one make sense of it.

Long is also intelligent about weaving in contemporary critical scholarship on a subject, thus bringing the reader up to date with current appraisals of the tradition. Here, for instance, is how he presents an account of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Notice that it defines the text while also making a point about a contemporary take on the text:

The *Bhagavad Gita*, or *Song of the Blessed Lord*, is an eighteen-chapter dialogue in which Kṛṣṇa, an incarnation of Isvara, the Supreme Lord, instructs Arjuna on how to attain mokṣa. It is, in effect, a summary of early Vedānta. As a portion of a highly popular epic tale, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhagavad Gita* provides a summary of the *Upaniṣads* for the common person. As one might recall, until the modern era, it was relatively rare for non-Brahmins to have direct access to Vedic texts, including the Upaniṣads. Smṛti texts such as the *Mahābhārata* and *Ramayana*, though, were available to all. As Bronkhorst has recently argued in a book titled *How the Brahmins Won*, the incorporation of Vedic themes into ancient Indian popular culture – in appealing stories such as the epics – aided the Brahmins in advancing their ideals at a time when non-Vedic philosophies like Buddhism and Jainism were predominant. The *Bhagavad Gita* is an important component of this popular presentation of Vedic thought. (189)

Because of such incorporations of scholarly perspectives within the introduction to the subject, the book is far more than an introductory volume on Indian philosophy. Indeed, the questions it leaves the reader with are not the ones that this review began with: those were about what one should look

for. The question that the process of reading Long's work foregrounds is: how should one write an introduction, especially to Indian philosophy? Because writing about the subject requires one to be heavily invested in thinking about the person that one aspires to be, such a book cannot be written from the standpoint of knowledge alone. It demands a certain dedication toward curiosity about self and reality, existence and non-existence of divinity, and so on while also eliciting a sense of wonder about the answers and perspectives various schools of thought put forth. In the process of uncovering these perspectives, one may or may not see the big picture of Indian philosophy. But one will definitely emerge riveted by the little insights into questions one faces everyday. Long's discussion of judging an action not by its consequences but by its intention is a case in point. While Jainism can be hard on someone for the consequences unleashed by their action, Buddhism can be quite forgiving if one's intention was not to harm. Seeing such everyday dilemmas in the light of larger scholasticism and worldviews is likely to make one feel light as well as help one relate to the labyrinthine ways of Indian philosophy.

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FAKE NEWS IN CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE AND POLITICS: A REQUIEM FOR THE REAL? By Keith Moser. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. 218 pp.

Could the postmodern subject, within the confines of the “hyperreal,” find an effective perspective that helps her/him enter freely into the inner workings of the “death” described by Saint Augustine, other than a will as narrated in *Aghwee the Sky Monster* by Kenzaburo Oe or in *The Last Day of a Condemned Man* by Victor Hugo?

In *Fake News in Contemporary Science and Politics: A Requiem for the Real?*, Keith Moser sheds light on the real-life consequences of the *infodemic* “threatening the stability of democratic institutions and the existence of all organisms on this biosphere, including *Homo sapiens*” (33), and offers us four enlightening revelations on the ubiquity of fake news and conspiracy theories (cf. QAnon and ANTIFA) in the larger context of the scientific and political realm. In a series of seamlessly connected musings from a plethora of philosophical and “evidenced-based” sources, Moser offers an overwhelmingly demonstrative discourse against “a requiem for the real on the horizon” (2). Specifically, Moser delves into postmodern or “Alt-Right politicians with autocratic tendencies” (100) all over the world (Donald Trump, Ron DeSantis, Jair Bolsonaro, Paul Kagame, Vladimir Putin, Boris Johnson, etc.) who take advantage of pro-administration messages on social media to suppress dissent and to consolidate even more power. Moser also outlines the fatal repercussions of living in an age of (dis-) information, as illustrated by the January 6th *coup d'état* attempt in the United States. Moreover, Moser's reflections about the deleterious effects of “alternative facts” in the scientific arena decry climate change skepticism-denial resulting in “no escape, or path for deviating from our *ecocidal* trajectory” (40). Moser also investigates the anti-vaccination movement, deconstructing the anti-science rhetoric promulgated by Big Carbon that has “whitewashed evidenced-based perspectives and replaced them with unfounded conspiracy theories” (68). Throughout the book, Moser underscores how Christian fundamentalists are trapped within a parallel universe of simulation, owing to the omnipresent influence of Rupert Murdoch's one-dimensional media empire that includes Fox News.

The fact that the book is more an assemblage of “science-based” perspectives than a rehashing of chimerical fantasies on social media, and that it at times presents more criticism than praise for great wealth without an altruism reconnecting to a deep knowledge of the cosmos, draws us to a matter of

preeminent street artist “Banksy’s hijacking of Disney images designed to undermine these signifiers” (166) and the works of “experimental and courageous Russian artists” (167) in major cities all throughout Russia. Moser indignantly argues, “When a world leader possesses the information superhighway, she-he has been bequeathed the capability of generating an alternate reality and a system of morality corresponding to these banal simulacra” (158).

As Jean-François Lyotard predicted regarding the degeneration of the situation (1984), we must further develop our “rending portrait of the postmodern subject who is condemned to live in a world from which all meaning has been excised” (155) in line with Baudrillard. For a civilization epitomized by “a flood of conspiracy theories and fake news stories” (107), Moser’s requiem for the post-truth era must be fully chanted as a counter-hegemonic prayer leading to the awareness of the “real.” Saint Augustine, in *Confessions*, describes the state before conversion as his death, and affirms that resurrection from that state is entering into faith. In this vein, Moser’s “requiem for the real” will speak to mortal fake news.

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MILTON, LONGINUS AND THE SUBLIME IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY. By Thomas Matthew Vozar. Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 2023. 224 pp.

John Milton’s first, fruitful acquaintance with the Longinian sublime, Vozar claims, was through his tutors, Thomas Young and Alexander Gil whose son, bearing the same name, alongside himself, were associated with Thomas Farnaby, who authored *Index Rhetoricus* (44). It was Hermogenes’s *Ars Rhetorica*, probably perused by Milton when studying at Christ’s College, Cambridge, that introduced sublimity in rhetoric, or rhetorical sublimity, to him. It is also, equally probable, that Thomas Dodington’s copy of the Porteus anthology, containing Longinus’s text, was not Greek to him. There is further possibility that Milton was not, during his famous Continental tour, unacquainted with Allatius, Holstenius’s frenemy, who had translated *Peri Hypsous* into Latin recently (49), not to mention Gerard Langbaine’s edition of Longinus, published in 1636 which included expansive notes on ways of approaching his text, and which is, unlikely, to have escaped Milton’s attention. All this would have served to further Milton’s grandeur of the Mind, his poetic inspiration, the perfect recipe behind the foundation of Longinian Sublimity, of “epic decorum” (54) being

dependent on rhetorical sublimity, while Milton devoted himself, slow and steady, through his prose and pamphlets, to *Paradise Lost*, in his final years.

But Milton would, carefully, demarcate the margins separating Biblical from Longinian Sublimity, and for good reason; without pitting the Greek poets against the Hebrew Prophets, Milton would, in and through both *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, illustrate how a simple style is conducive of Sublime mien, in the same way that the hyperbolic during Homeric times accomplished. Simplicity, in so far as it is written into hyperbolic restraint, knowing where to overthrow while displacing the pre-Christian will to act hyperbolically, is refined Longinian Sublimity, as Voza excerpts from Milton's *De Doctrina Christina*, the interdiction between "pagan rhetorical sublimity" and "biblical rhetorical sublimity." (58) Etymological origins are well-nigh Miltonic grandeur, as Voza observes how he assimilated prophecy, poetry and divine inspiration into an epic whole, battling the negative connotations of "enthusiasm", or more accurately, "Longinian rhetorical enthusiasm" (66) in his day, redefining the word/phrase across texts, like *Il Penseroso* and *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. This redefinition, combined with Hebraic simplicity, illuminates the invocation in the third book of *Paradise Lost*, where Longinian curb and spur are transformed, through Miltonic genius, into "sublime depth" and "sublime height" (69). Milton, the great Republican, had also borrowed from Longinian Republicanism in *Peri Hypsous*, campaigning against the enslavement of human minds by other humans, descent into primal hordes, or into moral degeneration. The individual must create and modify the political, and must not be coerced into its falsifiable structure, from within and never from without (81).

In the *Sublime Physics of Paradise Lost*, one discovers how, in *Quintum Novembris*, Milton's 1626 poem on the Gunpowder Plot, the Homeric idiom is modified, but with a difference: Milton's comparison of Satan with Etna is, unlike Tasso's comparison, directed towards Typhon, the entrapped dragon within the volcano (88). Voza, very industriously, argues through translations, and allegorical commentaries of the time, through Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Hesiod's *Theogony*, how such a thought may be applied to Satan. This Satan-Typhon parallel leads us to the central argument of the book: using Longinus, primarily, and others, secondarily, to demonstrate how Milton's sublimity is a "borrowed instrument" (96), borrowed from 17th century translations of authors writing within, or in denial of the Sublime tradition, upholding either the religious or the republican tradition. Unlike Sharon Achinstein, Voza is convinced that Satan, the giant, can only be visualized through the incomparable scientific discoveries of the day (Galileo's glass, for instance), the extraordinary tool to measure the extraordinary archangel. Milton, *a la* Longinus in his Sublime treatise, argues how the pygmies in Longinus are transplanted into *Paradise Lost*, into the imagery of the fallen archangels, and the imagery of a "humiliated army" (101), whose Pandemonium, their makeshift Parliament in Hell, is, in reality, their prison. Similarly, Adam must not philosophize or scientize upon God's sublimities, but in a typically Longinian fashion, admire them; the amplified vastness of an ever-expanding Universe, realized through the works of Galileo and Bruno, but suppressed by the Roman Catholic Church, is incorporated, in its absolute Sublime glory, by Milton who looks past religious dogma to perceive the fuller picture of what, to the Church, is nothing more than a "controversial cosmological hypothesis" (114). Milton's obsession with size is furthered in Book Two of *Paradise Lost*, in the description of Satan hurtling through Chaos, where Pyramidal size becomes a twice-determined, twice-borrowed instrument: the first Longinian, and the second from John Greaves's *Pyramidographia* (1646), a seventeenth-century Mathematician's book that extols the magnitude of the pyramids themselves, and the tombs within. (118)

In *Milton and the Theological Sublime*, Voza commences with a critical history of *Comus*; alongside sublime, physical might is now imagined virginal might, witnessed in the Lady's speech in Milton's masque. The purity of Biblical, Virginal might is compared with, and at times, hierarchized above Longinian, rhetorical might (123). Milton's *Tetrachordon* excerpts Daniel Chamier's *Panstratia Catholica* where he speculated how Longinus may have benefitted more from the character of

things, than from their articulation, assuming that words are not characters of things themselves, or that words are things, whose characters are written into the reader, irrespective of their characterization, or that words both precede their character and succeed their papered sign. Nevertheless, Longinus's "borrowed instrument", his majesty, is Hebraic, borrowed from Moses in the *Old Testament*. However, Longinian sublimity is on full display in Theomachy, the "combat of the gods" (125), where critical opinion has traditionally oscillated between classical travesty, in the portrayal of an excess, and the hyperbole of the sublime. Vozar himself wants Milton's "Vergilian gravity" (129) to be accepted on his hyperbolic terms ("humorously pedantic Latinism", etc.), and his "borrowed instrument", at times, borrows too much, from allusions, allusive sources and indebtedness to depart from allusion on his terms, for once, writing nothing but allusive invoices. Towards the conclusion of the book, the author retreats into the antitrinitarianism of *De Doctrina* where, through the divine scripture alone, can an aperture, leading towards the Christian God, be found (139), alongside representations of the *timor idololatricus* (divine dread of idols, as opposed to *timor dei*, God-fearing), in the same text, connotative of the Sublime fear directed towards a divine, Christian deity (146).

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SIMPLICITY AND PURITY: POETS, FARMERS AND PARSIS OF GANDHI'S GUJARATI AND READING GANDHI IN TWO TONGUES. By Tridip Suhrud. Studies in Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2023, 46 pp.

Brinda S Narayan notes that Tridip Suhrud, with "disarming modesty", had admitted to being addressed in "four pithy words" by the members of the academia; he described himself as a "scholar of modern Gujarat". Narayan introduces Suhrud as a Professor at the National Institute of Design, the Director of the Sabarmati Ashram, a pioneering figure in preserving and digitizing the Ashram's resources, and most importantly a translator of M K Gandhi's Gujarati texts into both Hindi and English; she speaks of his academic and scholarly roles while striking a conversation with him, on one occasion, regarding translation practices.

Suhrud has successfully invited academic scrutiny for his translations of and on Gandhi; his works include the latter's autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (2010). Suhrud's edition claims its expertise at annotating and contextualizing Gandhi's text like no other Gandhian scholar; in fact, it is, arguably, Suhrud who has engaged with Gandhi's literary language with fine detailing. This text entitled, *Simplicity and Purity: Poets, Farmers and Parsis of Gandhi's Gujarati and Reading Gandhi in Two Tongues* presents two of the more pertinent essays from Suhrud's scholarship on Gandhi.

While a reader may strive to find Suhrud's collection of essays in the academic market with only some degree of difficulty, Orient BlackSwan in association with the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University presents a series "for students, scholars, and teachers of comparative literature, arts, and other humanities departments" with an ambition "to explore a range of histories, theoretical reflections as well as innovative approaches and concerns relevant to the field of comparative literature". As the "General Introduction" to the text mentions, this project deals with the "imperatives of comparative literature"; it is both "intercultural and interdisciplinary" of which insights from *bhasha* literature and their translations serve an important role. The introductory section from the text provides a glimpse to the readers on the various cultural paradigms that relate closely to the greater concerns of the project.

The book contains two chapters that present Suhrud's essays. The first chapter must have been a decisive pick by the editors as it deals with a lesser-known Gandhi and his Gujarati consciousness.

Suhrud's essay, "Simplicity and Purity: Poets, Farmers and Parsis of Gandhi's Gujarati" may be read with critical attention to three arguments. To begin with, Suhrud studies Gandhi's bilingualism in the Gujarati and the English languages. The author almost historicizes Gandhi's experiences and charts the events after Gandhi's return to India in 1915. Suhrud notes Gandhi's troubled relations with the Gujarati Sahitya Parishad, his contentions with K M Munshi (the president of the Parishad in 1917), his admiration for the novelist Govardhanram Tripathi (despite his dislike for the novel as a generic form) and Gandhi's ideas on the class-based nature of the Gujarati language; all of which led to Gandhi's refusal to preside over the Parishad in 1925. In this discussion, Suhrud takes a cue from Sudhir Chandra to comment on Gandhi's intricate engagement with Gujarati: "It was the minimalism of one, who, possessing a wealth of words, allusions, and associations, had chosen to make less more." The author also records Gandhi's involvement with the "first major centers of Indology" including the Gujarat Vidyapith and he elucidates on Gandhi's interest in archival work as much as his disdain for what he read to be an act of class control over the Gujarati language by the trading class; he notes that it was the same trading class who defined the contemporary Gujarati intelligentsia.

Gandhi's attentive engagement with Gujarati, to Suhrud, manifested intriguingly in the former's works, especially in a text like *Hind Swaraj*. Suhrud is meticulous in his efforts to read through Gandhi's Gujarati rendition of the text and its English translation. He remarks that this text was exceptionally significant in studying Gandhi partly due to its claim to being the only text that was translated by Gandhi himself. He cites multiple instances of Gandhi's careful but cultural translation concerning terms like *sudharo* which had been used "in two senses"; both civilizational conduct and the idea of *dharma*. Similarly, he points out that Gujarati words like *adhunik* were translated by Gandhi not in the sense of the strictly 'modern' but with a connotation of transience and defilement. The longest discussion is, perhaps, regarding the term 'swaraj' where, as Suhrud points out, both the ideas of a sovereign political state and the moral conduct of one's being establish a differential relation to one another. He notes how Gandhi variably uses the terms "home rule" and 'the ability to rule over the self' as a floating equivalent to the Gujarati word '*swaraj*'. Thus, Suhrud studies Gandhi's translations from a minutely informed cultural vantage point.

The third argument of the chapter is also the most interesting one. Suhrud records instances that substantiate Gandhi's discomfort with the genre of the novels. He notes that Gandhi had attributed Gujarati's decadence, 'sensuality', and 'effeminacy' to the 'mercenary' nature of the Gujarati trading class and found the genre to be an extension of Western hegemony. He argues in his essay that Gandhi had hoped that Gujarati would take refuge in poetry to invigorate itself. In this context, he records Gandhi to have defined poetry through "faith and prayer"; one that could appeal to the humbler sections of the society.

To him, Gandhi's quest to democratize the Gujarati language would function through the repeated use of quotidian terms that belonged to the order of spirituality or *bhakti*. Gandhi had defined *bhakti* as one that placed "faith in the essential goodness of all human beings" and affirmed the "potential of all human beings to recognize pain and suffering of others". Suhrud notes that this ability to suffer founded the more crucial aspect of Gandhi's *satyagraha*. Interestingly, Suhrud also discusses what Gandhi understood to be poetry in another sense; poetry was not a generically limited term to Gandhi but the condition of a refined essence.

In the second chapter, "Reading Gandhi in Two Tongues", Suhrud reads Gandhi with a greater focus on his autobiography. He traces Gandhi's text and locates the unease with which Gandhi attempted to write it down. To Suhrud, both the novel and the autobiography were colonial genres borne out of a Western temperament. He argues that these foreign literary expressions had created a tension in the indigenous Indian mind which could also be noted in Gandhi. This frames Suhrud's broader claim to Gandhi's choice of the Gujarati title against the title of his autobiography in English. In Gujarati, *Atmakatha* implies an engagement with the soul as opposed to the egotistical self of the Western autobiography; again, the term *Atmakatha* is only featured as the subtitle of the

Gujarati autobiography. On the contrary, the English autobiography “An Autobiography” occupied the titular space. Suhrud elaborates on this argument to note how subjective experiences and objective narration engage with each other to address Gandhi’s narrative methodology.

Suhrud, also, touches upon Gandhi’s narrative of his South African experience and analyses the translative barriers in reading the terms ‘history’ and ‘*itihasa*’ together as equivalents. He understands Gandhi’s affinity to summarize Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* (1860) instead of translating it from a similar vein of thought. In his reading, Suhrud explores an arduous terrain of language, culture, and politics that had not, hitherto, received enough attention. Hence, Suhrud’s text is instrumental in understanding both Gandhi as a character and *Gandhivaad* as a performative aspect of an experience.

Suhrud’s text is presented through a close reading of Gandhi’s writings; in deed he attempts to construct Gandhi’s ‘self’ in and through the act of translation. Translation, in all its impossibilities, is a performance of reiterating both meaning and essence, if not the stringent form of the text. Thus, Suhrud, almost in a Derridean model, deconstructs Gandhi in order to create meaning. Suhrud’s translation is an act of affirming what one may call the politics of absences across texts which could only be explored through the semantic implications of culture.

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ROMANTIC WOMEN’S WRITING AND SEXUAL TRANSGRESSION. By Kathryn Ready and David Sigler (Eds.). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024. 208 pp.

Overcoming gender inequality was a developmental goal and the world is yet to achieve it. Women face various forms of discrimination across the ages and the period of Romantic Age in the history of English literature was no exception. Interpretations of British Romanticism have focused primarily on the five famous male authors: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Blake and Keats. Evidently, this interpretive gender-bias has ignored the accomplishments of women authors. One of the central characteristics of Romanticism would have to be the decadent erotic and morbid themes represented in *The Romantic Agony* (1933) by Mario Praz where he comprehensively discusses that imagination which culminates in sexual longing, activities and transgressions. These phallogentric actions are what Anne K. Mellor defines in *Romanticism and Gender* as “masculine Romanticism.” (19) Transgression, according to *Oxford’s Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, is “an act that goes beyond the limits of what is morally or legally acceptable” (1631). Kathryn Ready and David Sigler’s edited book *Romantic Women’s Writing and Sexual Transgression* talks about how Romantic women writings sexually transgress and how this transgression is represented in their artistic works.

David Sigler introduces the book with the conceptual meanings of sexual transgression and perversion. He begins by quoting Praz where he insists how the Romantics provided a psychological aspect of the process of refining perversity. He follows it up with a series of quotations and definitions to conceptualize the terms ‘sexual transgression’ and ‘perversity’. He discusses Richard C. Sha’s *Perverse Romanticism* claiming that “Perversion enables us to reimagine Romanticism from the ground up” (3). He mentions that the gendered, traditional studies of Romanticism encouraged the perception that women and their writings stayed within the particular sexual and mental limits. If they transgressed, it was only done secretly and not publicly. This is done to such an extent that women writers of that era were not even considered Romantic writers. This is because according to the Romantic scholars, male authors possessed the desire to produce works which sexually trans-

gressed vague values and women writers did not have perverse geniuses to sexually transgress. He further reiterates that only two women Romantic writers (Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley) received mentions in Praz's book which Sigler thinks is highly "sexist" (2). With the evolution of gender studies, male and women have diverged and are separately questioned and understood. Sigler insists upon a Lacanian approach towards sexual transgression by Astrid Gessert which means "stepping over" (35). This means that there is a set limit and that limit divides two different parts: one that is legitimate and the other that is not. The readers would need to understand these two divisions in order to understand transgression.

The next chapter, "Feminizing Romantic Sexuality, Perverting Feminine Romanticism", discusses the female transgressive writers of the Romantic period. Kathryn Ready mentions the names of a female writers' collective and their works which can be studied and analyzed through the lenses of sexual transgression as described in the introduction; she states extramarital sexuality, incest, necrophilia, same-sex love, female romantic friendship and other valuable transgressions in Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Inchbald, Mary Hays, Charlotte Dacre, Mary Diana Dods and Mary Shelley. She, with the help of Foucauldian arguments of reducing harsh punishments in the nineteenth century, claims that "medicalizing and pathologizing of bodies of sexualities" (15) were done. She mentions *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (1990) by Thomas Lanqueur to explain "a transition ... from a one-sex model which regards male and female genitalia as inversions of one another to a two-sex model that considers them as essentially different" (16).

The third chapter, "Reorienting Multiple-dimensional Sex with Objects in *Millennium Hall*" by Kate Singer interprets the novel as one that emphasizes bodies as playthings and spaces which lead to women narratives. Sarah Scott, in her novel *Millennium Hall* (1762), layers these toys and spaces as well as gifts to evaluate the readers' understanding of the objects in a gender-specific manner with their experimental sexual relations rather than heteronormative ones. Toys do not generally assume sexual imagery equivalent to women's breasts (maternal) or the male penis (phallic object), they are mere non-living, neuter-gendered objects as stereotyped traditionally. Scott gives them a sexual dimension in the narratives of women to achieve sexual freedom. For example, the relationship between Miss Mancel and Miss Morgan, in *Millennium Hall* (1762), revolves around the mutual exchange of knowledge and books as Miss Mancel's desire to learn and Miss Morgan's desire to instruct her pleasurably satisfies both. Moreover, Scott also plays with the spaces such as the hall and its pastoral areas in the novel which is equivalent to the female genital space.

The succeeding chapter reimagines necrophilia as a sexual transgression which is opted by Mary Wollstonecraft to gain sexual freedom and rights through her unfinished story, "The Cave of Fancy". The story revolves around Sagestus, a sage, who sedulously desires corpses from a wrecked ship on an island to a point where concupiscence takes over, developing a corpse fetish. Accordingly, Sagestus thinks that sexual attraction towards dead bodies might present new ways and ideas of exploring immortalities and pleasures. Wollstonecraft makes the dead alluring, thus making it sexually pleasing. Rebecca E. May calls this the "necro-gaze" in "Morbid Parts: Gender, Seduction and the Necro-gaze" (168-9) in *Sexual Perversions, 1670-1890* (2009). It also qualifies to be perverse as suggested by David Siglar through the aberration of the type of writing done by Wollstonecraft. Siglar claims that the cave and the beach

represent death in different degrees: the beach is the scene of death construed chaotically, and the cave represents chaos adapted into a form of living death in which death can be raised to the level of categorical imperative (54).

Mary Hays's second novel, *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799) explores the institutions that help patriarchal constructions subordinate women. This is a perfect example of two females who experience sexual trauma but of two different types. The "elder Mary is sexually transgressive whereas her daughter (Mary) is sexually transgressed against" (Hurlock, 72-73). Unlike the women in *Millennium Hall* (1762) who choose to be aided by sex toys while Wollstonecraft preferred corpse as an

apparatus towards sexual freedom, the elder Mary attempts to control her body and becomes a prostitute to earn her living, breaking the shackles of a dominant patriarchal system which bars the women from outrageous acts of transgression. Kathleen Emily Hurlock, in her essay “Sexual Violence, Sexual Transgression and the Law in Mary Hays’s *The Victim of Prejudice*”, states that the elder Mary “openly chooses and enjoys her transgressive sexuality until she is disciplined for it” (73). On the other hand, her daughter Mary is the “unconsenting victim of a legally and culturally transgressive sexual act” (Hurlock, 73). Thus, the novel delivers feminist potential to gain sexual freedom which leads to the act of resistance against androcentric laws.

The next essay “Thoughts that Breathes and Words that Burn: Barbauld, Masturbation and the Novel” deals with the effects of novel reading on women. Kathryn Ready states that in *The British Novelists* (1810), “Barbauld reiterates the concerns... over the modern growth and the negative influence of novel-reading especially on young women” (90). Here, novel-reading was considered equivalent to masturbation as it gratifies the women. Barbauld associates these masturbatory perils with French novels and romances. On the contrary, she has no objection about the English writers such as Philip Sydney *Arcadia* but according to her there are English writers who experience moral lapses, like William Hogarth and Aphra Behn. Barbauld seems not to be worried about the masturbation which she criticized earlier; instead, she uses figurative, masturbatory language in one of her poems, “Song I”. Thus, she indulges in “a degree of autoerotic fantasy in her own writing” (Ready 86).

Mary Shelley had written *Mathilda* (1959) to focus on the medicalization of women’s body and aestheticizing death. Crystal Veronie attests that “*Mathilda* expands on... Romantic notions of the fragments concerning women’s perspective, sexuality, illness and death” (113). Being sexually assaulted, Mathilda grows up to be a mature woman and voices her narrative in confidence. The character of Mathilda changes from being innocent to a complex one with sexual trauma, loss of parents and illness. On the other hand, the guilt of the failure of her relationship with her father makes her think that her body is responsible for the sexual objectification and incestuous desire by her father. Her father’s transgressive desire leads him to his suicide. Thus, eventually Mathilda’s body stands responsible for escape from her father’s sexual assault.

In this book, Richard C. Sha demonstrates George Sand’s transgression of utopian idealism. He says that “utopia acts as a vantage point so that the consequences of transgression are not assumed and can be more readily evaluated” (140). Sand uses transgressions or rather “rule-breaking” (152) as a means to start something new or meaningful in the novel *Indiana* (1832). If Indiana transgresses the marriage, she should be supported economically. Thus, as Kathryn Ready avers, sexual transgression acts as a way to achieve freedom, and Indiana does exactly the same.

In short, the book purveys a wide range of women writings of the Romantic period. It explores the manifold ways through which women gain freedom, sexually and intellectually. The most interesting of all the essays would have to be “The Necrophilia of Wollstonecraft’s *The Cave of Fancy*”. Overall, all the essays prove that women were not the objects of medical experiments and tests. Medically and physically, they were active and participated in projecting their voice and their sexual transgressions to the fullest.

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READING WITH THE R̥ṢI: A CROSS-CULTURAL AND COMPARATIVE LITERARY APPROACH TO VĀLMĪKĪ'S RĀMĀYAṆA. By Robert P. Goldman. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2024. 72 pp.

How does an ancient Sanskrit epic like the Rāmāyaṇa continue to resonate across different cultures and eras? What challenges do modern translators and readers face in comprehending its complex themes and intricate narratives? How can such a narrative be both a reflection of its own era and a source of insight for contemporary society? In *Reading with the R̥ṣi: A Cross-Cultural and Comparative Literary Approach to Vālmīkī's Rāmāyaṇa*, Robert P. Goldman embarks on a cross-cultural and comparative literary journey to explore these questions. This book, which is based on a lecture delivered by Goldman at Jadavpur University, delves deeply into the nature and contents of the Rāmāyaṇa, tracing its transmission and reception from its inception through modernity, as well as examining its pervasive influence on religious, ethical, social, and political thought since its composition across Southeast Asia.

The book begins by grappling with a fundamental question: how should a reader positioned in the 21st century navigate a literary work dating back to the first millennium BCE? Goldman confronts head-on the linguistic and cultural barriers that confront modern readers engaging with the Rāmāyaṇa. The epic's composition in a variant of Classical Sanskrit known as *ārṣa*, the language of the rishis or seers, presents formidable obstacles (2). Hence the title of the book, *Reading with the R̥ṣi*, encapsulates the necessity for modern readers to approach the text with an appreciation of its ancient linguistic characteristics and cultural contexts, urging a nuanced approach to interpretation rather than thrusting upon it the concerns of modern aesthetic sensibilities. Goldman proposes two distinct approaches to interpreting the Rāmāyaṇa: the *etic* and *emic*, terms coined by linguist Kenneth Pike (4). *Emic* entails understanding cultural or religious phenomena from the perspective of insiders, providing insights based on internal perceptions and values. In contrast, *etic* involves studying these phenomena from an outsider's viewpoint, offering interpretations that may be more detached from the cultural context. This approach is useful in navigating an ancient text as it integrates both subjective (*emic*) and objective (*etic*) viewpoints, enriching the understanding of the epic's significance.

In the section titled "What is the Vālmīkī Rāmāyaṇa?", Goldman explores the genre classification of the Rāmāyaṇa, questioning whether it should be viewed as a poetic history or a historical poem. He problematises the general tendency to categorise both the *Mahābhārata* and the Rāmāyaṇa under the generic Western term 'epic'. Goldman further highlights ancient India's extensive tradition of literary classification, analysis, and interpretation, which includes a sophisticated system of genre distinctions (14). Despite this rich tradition, he notes the difficulty in finding precise terms within Indian literary theory that align perfectly with the Western concept of an epic. According to Sanskrit authorities on literary criticism, the Rāmāyaṇa is classified under the specific genre of *mahākāvya*, while the *Mahābhārata* is classified as *itihāsa*. However, Goldman points out that even though the Sanskrit lexicon encompasses a wide array of literary types, there isn't a single precise genre term that unequivocally classifies both texts. This nuanced exploration underscores the complexities of genre classification across Sanskrit literary traditions, highlighting the unique challenges posed by the *Mahābhārata* and the Rāmāyaṇa within the framework of Indian literary theory.

In discussing the genre classification of the *Mahābhārata* and the Rāmāyaṇa, Goldman notes that while the *Mahābhārata* is the prototypical *itihāsa*, the Rāmāyaṇa, on the other hand, is the archetypal *mahākāvya* (15). However, he emphasises that these genre categories are not rigidly defined, and more often than not their characteristics bleed into one another. Goldman meticu-

lously cites examples where the *Mahābhārata* describes itself as both *kāvya* and *itihāsa*. Similarly, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, while proclaiming itself to be the archetypal *mahākāvya*, exhibits traits of both genres. For instance, it features extensive catalogues of characters, genealogies, weapons, flora, and fauna, which are some of the most common characteristics of *itihāsa*.

Goldman employs the concept of *vyutpatti* to discern the subtle nuances between *itihāsa* and *mahākāvya*. *Vyutpatti* can be translated as edification or cultivation of mind. According to Abhinavagupta, a prominent proponent of the *rasa-dhvani* school along with Ānandavardhana, the purpose of all genres of composition is *vyutpatti*. He states that all texts, regardless of their genre, should provide teaching regarding the four principal aims of human life—*dharma* (duty), *artha* (wealth), *kāma* (pleasure), and *mokṣa* (liberation). However, different genres achieve this edifying function in distinct ways (17). For instance, the *Vedas* teach in the manner of a master, *itihāsa* teaches in the manner of a friend, and *kāvya* teaches in the manner of a wife. Therefore, the distinguishing feature of *kāvya* is that it prioritises pleasure or delight over its instructional and educational obligation. Goldman further explores the *rasa-dhvani* school of Sanskrit literary criticism to understand the core essence of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, moving away from the Western classification of the text as an ‘epic’. According to the *rasa-dhvani* school, “the principal aesthetic-emotive sentiment (*rasa*) of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is *karuṇa-rasa*, the sublimated emotion of *śoka* or grief” (18). This perspective offers a deeper understanding of the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s affective and aesthetic impact, highlighting its unique qualities beyond the generic Western classification.

Goldman undertakes a comparative analysis of ancient Greek and Sanskrit epics, drawing inspiration from Matthew Arnold’s renowned lectures on Homeric epics, delivered at Oxford in 1860 and later published as *On Translating Homer*. In these lectures, Arnold outlines four principal stylistic virtues of epic poetry: simplicity, rapidity, plainness of thought, and nobility (26). Arnold’s framework has long been influential in the study of Western epic traditions. However, Goldman argues that these virtues do not adequately capture the essence of Sanskrit epics, nor perhaps other non-Western epic traditions. He finds Arnold’s criteria too narrow and culturally specific to encompass the rich diversity of epic traditions worldwide. Instead, Goldman proposes alternative points of comparison that he believes offer a more accurate and insightful understanding of both Greek and Sanskrit epics. Metrical differences, narrative breadth, and directness of storytelling are, according to Goldman, more relevant points of comparison between the Sanskrit and Greek epics.

Goldman’s work stands out for its detailed analysis of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a cornerstone of both Indian and world literature, highlighting its exceptional poetic qualities and its enduring impact. He navigates the epic’s rich narrative landscape, addressing the complexities it presents to contemporary translators and readers. Through this, Goldman sheds light on how the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been interpreted and reinterpreted across time, revealing the dynamic interplay between the ancient text and modern sensibilities. By examining the *Rāmāyaṇa* within the framework of both Western and Indian aesthetic norms and tastes, Goldman provides a unique perspective on its literary significance. His comparative approach underscores the epic’s universal themes and its ability to transcend cultural boundaries. This comprehensive study not only reaffirms the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s status as a monumental work of Indian literature but also as an essential component of global literary heritage.

Reading with the *R̥ṣi* is not just an academic treatise but a celebration of the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s lasting legacy. It invites readers to reconsider the epic’s relevance today, offering fresh insights into its role in shaping and reflecting the cultural ethos of India. Goldman’s scholarly yet accessible analysis makes this book an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the intersections of literature, culture, and history, and it promises to deepen our understanding of one of the world’s most enduring and influential epics.

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THE REAL THING: REFLECTIONS ON A LITERARY FORM. By Terry Eagleton. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2024. 219 pp.

Realism is a family of concepts, and like many a family they do not always see eye to eye. (Eagleton 45)

In Henry James's short story "The Real Thing", Mr. Monarch and his wife make themselves available to the portrait artist as models due to hard financial circumstances, yet they end up dismissed as they are too real to inspire the artist's imagination. Their sketches look exactly like them; a stereotypical duplicate of themselves which resists all possibilities for portrayal, questioning thus the very meaning of being real as well as the dialogic relationship between realism and artistic creation, keeping in mind that "too much reality can be detrimental to realism" (75) for "art presents things as they are only by an imaginative transformation of them— one which may make them seem even more real than they appear in everyday life" (76).

This would extend to debate the shaping factors of literary realism within the boundary dynamics of the factual and the fictitious; the object and its representation. Besides, the artist's dismissal of the Monarchs owing to their failure to be transformed into visual recreation puts into question the complex relationship between reality and reproducibility, hence shaking the taken-for-granted mirror effect of realistic fiction.

In this tone, the fascinating book *The Real Thing: Reflections on a Literary Form* discusses the term realism in relation to literature, bringing into question the framing strips of reality and realism within the literary, social and political realms of truth, illusion, faithfulness, representation, imitation, and interpretation.

Written by the distinguished literary and cultural theorist and critic Terry Eagleton, the book is regeneratively pregnant with a non-finite series of philosophical debates about the sense and essence of 'the real thing' as a concept, a theory and a practice which has much to do with literary formations. It is divided into five main chapters. The first introduces realism and the idea of getting real. The second and third discuss the question: what is realism? The fourth chapter debates the politics of realism, and the fifth is about realism and the common life.

The book initiates with discussing realism in language, philosophy and fiction, opposing the concept to illusion, fantasy and idealism, as it resonates with the factual within the shores of empirical, cognitive and moral theories. This sparks a subsequent debate about the interrelationship between the realistic, the reasonable, the rational and the feasible.

To be realist is to receive outer reality as it really is. However, to what extent can one's act of reality reception be validated as real since it stems from a series of subjective inner impressions and perceptions of images, voices and ideas that abide by compact sensory systems which are, in their turn, highly sensitive to a chain of socio-cultural politics of meaning formations? If what people consider as facts are mere subjective interpretations – as affirms Nietzsche and his postmodern successors, through what standards can realism be measured? Are these standards a private property of individuals themselves or rather part of common sense, as suggests Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* through "someone who exclaims, 'But I know how tall I am!' and places his hand on top of his head. He fails to grasp the fact that height is measured by a common standard. Instead, he is as tall as he is tall?" (31)

This questions the relevance of the expression 'it's true for me' which considers one's own referencing system as the radical base for all convictions and interpretations, ignoring that no definition or comparison can be done without some shared criteria, and thus "consensus of some kind is unavoidable even for disagreement" as "we determine what is true or false in language, and language is nobody's private property" (30–31). Yet, at the same time, language cannot be

considered as representing reality, for “concepts [...] are not best thought of as mental pictures. [They are rather] ways of using words, not reflections of objects. Meaning is a social practice, not in the first place a process in our heads”; striking examples in this context are expressions like ‘maybe’ and ‘Hi there’ (71–72).

Eagleton affirms that “the term ‘realism’ seems to have entered the English language in 1853, as a way of describing the fiction of Honoré de Balzac” (46) known for its satirical tone towards French nobility though sympathizing with it, “blend[ing] emotional engagement with intellectual impartiality” (43). As a reaction against the false poetic idealism of romantic and neo-classical art, then the manners, hypocrisies and fancies of eighteenth and first half of nineteenth centuries, with pens as those of George Eliot, Stendhal, George Sand, Alexander Pushkin, Arnold Bennett, George Moore, Josiah Gilbert Holland, Jack London, Henry James, Charles Dickens, Ian Watt and Iris Murdoch to name a few, realistic fiction claims itself to be “the bible of an increasingly godless age” (12) which voices out the ‘Populace’- the working class as well as the lower and middling middle classes, from Gulliver and Robinson Crusoe to David Copperfield and Dorothea Brook (165), over aristocrats, nobles and mythical heroes; “an art of unmasking and debunking” (50) the atrocities of the classical, neo-classical and Victorian social conventions, scandalizing the worlds of Sophocles, Pope and Racine; an art of “deceptive clarity” (103) which shifts concern from the church, erotic love affairs, unbalanced family relationships, and notions of blood and nobility to masses’ daily hardships and common spheres, or “what George Eliot in *Adam Bede* calls the faithful representing of common thing” (167).

Nonetheless, Eagleton stresses the fact that “realism is by no means confined to prose or to the modern period.”, because “what counts as realist is culturally variable” (59), giving examples of realist poetry as that of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and Wordsworth’s ‘*Michael*’, and Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* which he describes as ‘a comic epic in prose’. This suggests that “realism is parasitic on previous literary forms, rather as a lot of modernist art continues to depend on the very realism it spurns” (111). For György Lukács, realism’s “three major phases are ancient Greece, the Renaissance and early nineteenth-century France” (140). Realist fiction, for him, stands as revealing the fundamental currents and conflicts of society, yet at the same time unifying them into an artistic whole, combining the typical with the individual (134–135), and highlighting the underlying historical significance of art’s surroundings (139). This Marxist viewpoint would be confirmed by Raymond Williams, asserting that “in the highest realism, [...] society is seen in fundamentally personal terms, and persons, through relationships, in fundamentally social terms”, which relates realism with contingency and necessity (122–123).

Eagleton also questions realist fiction’s illusive faithfulness to reality, being exposed to some degree of author’s manipulation which makes “the gap between actual and poetic justice looms embarrassingly large” (104), especially that “plenty of fictional protagonists seem to have strayed onto the realist stage from myth, epic or romance” (48). In this sense, the phrase ‘literary realism’ would be self-contradictory as ‘realism’ suggests the gritty, unadorned, caustic and abrasive, while literature is shaped with technique and literary devices (57). This recalls the initial question: how would ‘realist fiction’ belong to fictitious world and at the same time be realist? A possible answer may be ‘it should not read as *Alice in Wonderland*.’

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JOURNALS RECEIVED

British Journal of Aesthetics, Comparative Literature, New Literary History, Poetics Today, Philosophy and Literature, Critical Inquiry, Journal of Modern Literature, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism

The *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* (ISSN 0252-8169) is a quarterly peer-reviewed academic journal published by Vishvanatha Kaviraja Institute of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics, India, since 1977. The Institute was founded by Prof. Ananta Charan Sukla (1942-2020) on 22 August 1977, coinciding with the birth centenary of renowned philosopher, aesthetician, and historian of Indian art Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) to promote interdisciplinary studies and research in comparative literature, literary theory and criticism, aesthetics, philosophy, art history, criticism of the arts, and history of ideas. (Vishvanatha Kaviraja, most widely known for his masterpiece in aesthetics, *Sahitya-darpana*, or the "Mirror of Composition," was a prolific 14th-century Indian poet, scholar, aesthetician, and rhetorician.)

The Journal publishes essays and book reviews ranging across the literary and philosophical traditions of the East and the West, addressing interdisciplinary and cross-cultural issues in literary understanding and interpretation, aesthetic theories, conceptual analysis of art, literature, philosophy, religion, mythology, history of ideas, literary theory, history, and criticism. It also publishes special issues of current critical interest and contemporary relevance.

The Journal has published the finest of essays by authors of global renown like René Wellek, Harold Osborne, John Hoppers, John Fisher, Murray Krieger, Martin Bocco, Remo Ceserani, J.B. Vickery, Menachem Brinker, Milton Snoeyenbos, Mary Wiseman, Ronald Roblin, T.R. Martland, S.C. Sengupta, K.R.S. Iyengar, Charles Altieri, Martin Jay, Jonathan Culler, Richard Shusterman, Robert Kraut, Terry Diffey, T.R. Quigley, R.B. Palmer, Keith Keating, and many others. Some of these celebrated essays have been published by Routledge in book format.

Celebrated scholars of the time like René Wellek, Harold Osborne, Mircea Eliade, Monroe Beardsley, John Hoppers, John Fisher, Meyer Abrams, John Boulton, and many renowned foreign and Indian scholars were Members of the Editorial Board of the journal.

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